

# Play Skills for Parents

Connecting With Your  
Child Through Play



**KATHY EUGSTER**

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Child Through Play

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This book is an educational resource for parents and offers suggestions for helpful ways to play with their children, but may not be appropriate for children suffering from certain physical, emotional, or behavioral difficulties. This book is not intended as a substitute for advice from a professional. If you require such advice, you should seek the services of a competent professional in the appropriate specialty.

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## Dedication

To all of the children who have helped me to recognize  
the power of play in child development.

Especially so to each of my children and grandchildren.  
You have all been, and continue to be, superb teachers!

# Table of Contents

<b>Part I Introducing Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime!</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
Background	3
What is Play?	5
What is Parent-Child Play?	7
Styles of Parent-Child Play	9
Are There Guidelines for Parent-Child Play?	11
Benefits of Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime	14
Are Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime Suitable for Everyone?	19
About This Book	22
<b>Chapter 2: The Basic Framework for Playtime</b>	<b>25</b>
Parental Roles and Skills	25
Child-Directed Playtime Roles and Skills	27
Parent-Directed Playtime Roles and Skills	30
Differences Between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime	32
Stay in an Adult Role	34
Chapter Summary	35
<b>Part II Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Chapter 3: The Empathic Skills</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Empathic Skill #1: The Describing Skill</b>	<b>39</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	39
Examples of Using the Describing Skill	39
Tips for Using the Describing Skill	40
Why Use the Describing Skill?	42
Getting Started Activity #1: Practice Using the Describing Skill	43
<b>Empathic Skill #2: The Feelings Identification Skill</b>	<b>45</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	45

Examples of Using the Feelings Identification Skill	45
Tips for Using the Feelings Identification Skill	47
What Happens After You Make a Feelings Identification Statement?	51
Learn More About Feelings	54
Why Use the Feelings Identification Skill?	57
Getting Started Activity #2: Practice Using the Feelings Identification Skill	58
<b>Empathic Skill #3: The Paraphrasing Skill</b>	<b>62</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	62
Examples of Using the Paraphrasing Skill	62
Why Use the Paraphrasing Skill?	66
Getting Started Activity #3: Practice Using the Paraphrasing Skill	66
<b>Empathic Skill #4: The Encouragement Skill</b>	<b>68</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	68
Examples of Using the Encouragement Skill	68
Why Use the Encouragement Skill?	71
Getting Started Activity #4: Practice Using the Encouragement Skill	71
<b>Chapter Summary</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Chapter 4: The Autonomy Skills</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Autonomy Skill #1: The Independence Skill</b>	<b>75</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	75
Examples of Using the Independence Skill	76
Tips for Using the Independence Skill	78
More Examples of Using the Independence Skill	85
Why Use the Independence Skill?	91
Getting Started Activity #5: Practice Using the Independence Skill	92
<b>Autonomy Skill #2: The Following Directions Skill</b>	<b>95</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	95
Tips for Using the Following Directions Skill	96
Examples of Following Directions When You Are Invited to Do a Task	97
Examples of Following Directions When You Are Invited to Engage in Imaginary Play	99
Examples of Following Directions When You Are Invited to Play a Game with Rules	107
Why Use the Following Directions Skill?	112
Getting Started Activity #6: Practice Using the Following Directions Skill	112

Chapter Summary	116
<b>Chapter 5: The Limit-Setting Skill</b>	<b>118</b>
Why Use the Limit-Setting Skill?	118
How Do You Use This Skill?	119
Step 1: Setting the Limit	121
Step 2: Providing a Warning of a Consequence	126
Step 3: Enforcing the Consequence	129
Getting Started Activity #7: Practice Using the Limit-Setting Skill	132
Chapter Summary	136
<b>Chapter 6: Step-by-Step Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime</b>	<b>138</b>
Things to Consider Ahead of Playtime	138
Indicating Start and End Time	142
Positioning Yourself	143
Initiating Child-Directed Playtime	144
Engaging in Child-Directed Playtime	144
Ending Child-Directed Playtime	148
Options After Ending Playtime	148
Examples of Child-Directed Playtime	150
Other Ways to Engage in Child-Directed Playtime	155
Chapter Summary	160
<b>Chapter 7: The Play Area and Toys for Child-Directed Playtime</b>	<b>162</b>
The Play Area for Child-Directed Playtime	162
Toys for Child-Directed Playtime	162
Chapter Summary	171
<b>Part III Guidelines for Parent-Directed Playtime</b>	<b>172</b>
<b>Chapter 8: The Play Structuring Skills</b>	<b>173</b>
What are “Fun Activities”?	174
Tips for Using the Play Structuring Skills	176
<b>Play Structuring Skill #1: The Engagement Skill</b>	<b>183</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	183
Examples of Using the Engagement Skill	184
Tips for Using the Engagement Skill	194
Examples of Using the Engagement Skill for Teaching	196

Why Use the Engagement Skill?	208
Getting Started Activity #8: Practice Using the Engagement Skill	209
<b>Play Structuring Skill #2: The Regulating Skill</b>	<b>212</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	212
Examples of Using the Regulating Skill	213
Tips for Using the Regulating Skill	214
Why Use the Regulating Skill?	217
Getting Started Activity #9: Practice Using the Regulating Skill	218
Chapter Summary	220
<b>Chapter 9: Step-by-Step Guidelines for Parent-Directed Playtime</b>	<b>222</b>
Initiating Parent-Directed Playtime	223
Engaging in Parent-Directed Playtime	223
Ending Parent-Directed Playtime	226
Examples of Parent-Directed Playtime	227
Chapter Summary	231
<b>Chapter 10: The Play Area and Toys for Parent-Directed Playtime</b>	<b>232</b>
The Play Area for Parent-Directed Playtime	232
Toys for Parent-Directed Playtime	233
Chapter Summary	237
<b>Part IV Advanced Playtime</b>	<b>238</b>
<b>Chapter 11: Understanding Children’s Play</b>	<b>239</b>
Understanding Children’s Play	239
What are Play Themes?	240
Common Play Themes	241
Parents’ Questions About Play Themes	248
Chapter Summary	257
<b>Chapter 12: Switching Play Styles</b>	<b>259</b>
What Style of Play Should You Use?	259
<b>Advanced Playtime Skill: The Switch-or-Stay Skill</b>	<b>264</b>
How Do You Use This Skill?	264
Examples of Using the Advanced Playtime Switch-or-Stay Skill	266
Chapter Summary	277



<b>Chapter 13: Generalizing Playtime Skills to Real Life</b>	<b>279</b>
Describing Skill	280
Feelings Identification Skill	280
Paraphrasing Skill	281
Encouragement Skill	282
Independence Skill	282
Following Directions Skill	283
Limit-Setting Skill	284
Engagement Skill	286
Regulating Skill	287
Chapter Summary	288
<b>Chapter 14: Using Play to Reduce Anxiety in Your Child</b>	<b>290</b>
Sources of Anxiety in Childhood	291
Using the Play Skills to Reduce Anxiety	291
Play Activities to Help Your Anxious Child	292
Chapter Summary	296
<b>Closing Note</b>	<b>297</b>
<b>Appendix: Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities</b>	<b>299</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>319</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>323</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>329</b>

# Part I

Introducing Child-Directed  
Playtime and Parent-  
Directed Playtime!

# Chapter I:

## Introduction

### Background

Hello parents and caregivers! I am so glad you have decided to learn about parent-child play and how it can truly be a gift for both you and your child. Looking back on when my children were young, there were very few guidelines for parents on how to play with their children (as is still the case), so I basically had to rely on my own experience of playing as a child. Luckily, that seemed to work out just fine. I now have such very fond memories of playing together with my children and being with them as they made up stories and imaginary scenes with their toys. I always felt so fortunate to be included in these play scenarios. The beauty and complexity of my children's play has never ceased to amaze me.

In my career as a counselling therapist, I specialized in working with children between the ages of three and twelve years old, many with challenging social-emotional and behavioral problems. Very early on in my career, I discovered that play therapy was the best way to help and support children within this age range in overcoming problems and healing from past difficulties.

Over my many years of working with children as a play therapist, I was very drawn to the play therapy approaches that were based on child-directed play principles (Nondirective Play Therapy or Child-Centered Play Therapy). I used these play therapy approaches extensively with the children I was seeing. I was amazed at how the children responded so positively to child-directed

play and the degree to which this style of play therapy benefitted children who were coming in with challenging behavioral or emotional problems.

I also found that parents and caregivers were very interested in and willing to learn effective ways of playing with their children at home. Fortunately, there are play therapy approaches that include parents as part of the child's therapy (Filial Therapy and Child-Parent Relationship Therapy). These approaches involved me, the play therapist, teaching the parents of the children I was seeing basic child-directed play principles. The purpose was to increase the effectiveness of play therapy for the child and to strengthen the parent-child relationship. Using these approaches in my clinical work, I could see the beauty of children and parents connecting through play. Parents would also report feeling more confident as they learned some guidelines for playing with their children at home.

These approaches were very successful in my practice. Children's problems were reduced. Parents and children got along better. Parents were excited and happy to learn some different ways to play with their children at home. And, of course, the children were even happier to have me teach their parents some ways they could play together!

As a play therapist, I found, however, that some children needed a more structured and directive approach to play. In the play therapy field, there are many directive play therapy approaches where the therapist would structure and guide the child in various play activities. I became very interested in one particular directive play therapy approach (Theraplay) and another directive child therapy approach (Parent-Child Interaction Therapy) that included parents in the child's therapy. One of the goals of these approaches is to help parents develop a more attuned and connected relationship with their children.

Again, these approaches were very successful in my practice. Parents appreciated being able to structure the playtime as needed to engage, regulate, and guide their children through play activities. Often, the focus was to support a child in a specific skill, such as listening, following directions, and engaging interactively. Children, meanwhile, learned that interactions with their parents could be fun and pleasurable.

The play therapy approaches mentioned above have been researched extensively and found to be effective in helping families that have experienced a wide range of problems. These approaches are effective in supporting

children’s healthy development, reducing behavior problems, helping parents feel more confident about their parenting, and also in strengthening the parent-child relationship (Baggerly et al., 2010; Bratton et al., 2005; Cornett & Bratton, 2015; Ray & McCullough, 2016; Reddy et al., 2016). In addition, these approaches are recommended not only for families with children experiencing difficulties, but also as educational and preventive approaches that could be helpful for all families (Booth & Jernberg, 2010; VanFleet, 1994).

After I retired from clinical practice, because I felt strongly that parent-child play was so important for both children and parents, I began thinking about how I could make available to parents in general guidelines for parent-child play using principles from the various play therapy approaches mentioned above. As a child and play therapist, I realized the enormous benefits of play, not only for children who were experiencing difficulties, but also for children who were developing typically. I also knew that there were minimal guidelines for parents on playing effectively with their children and wanted to share my knowledge and expertise on parent-child play.

I retired just before the pandemic hit in 2020, so during the long months of isolation and restrictions, I began to consolidate guidelines for parent-child play by adapting principles and ideas from the various play therapy approaches that I had used in my clinical practice. This book is the result of this work.

.....  
*Almost any parent-child duo can benefit from the guidelines outlined in this book. Children do not need to be suffering from emotional or behavioral problems to benefit from playtime with their parents.*  
.....

## What is Play?

First of all, what is “play”? There are many definitions of play, but I like to define play for young children as a freely chosen activity where there is no intended or specific goal to be achieved. Positive feelings are gained just by participating in the play. Play often has a pretend quality, which means it gives children the freedom to be creative and innovative by making up new meanings for objects and events. Play also stimulates thinking and

problem-solving skills by giving a child the chance to decide what to do with a particular object.

I like to categorize play into four different stages that begin at different times as a child matures.

- Sensorimotor play begins with infants during their first year. This is when children begin to understand they have control over their bodies and other objects. They use all their senses plus their motor skills to explore. As children mature, sensorimotor play continues to be very important for healthy child development.
- Construction play begins between fifteen to twenty-four months. Here the child starts to take pleasure in putting things together, such as shape sorting and stacking or grouping objects. This type of play continues as children mature and as they use more complex construction toys and materials.
- Symbolic, imaginary, or pretend play is common from ages two to six years and continues to develop in complexity in children over six years old. It is basically the most creative form of play. Children love to pretend to be someone or something else and create stories and different scenarios. Children will act these stories out by, for example, pretending to feed a doll, pretending a block is a boat, or pretending to act out a role as a superhero.
- Games with rules, such as board games, card games, or other competitive games, are a more mature and structured form of play and are more appropriate for children ages five and up.

No matter what the play activity, play has serious, positive consequences for human development. Child development experts all agree that play itself is a necessary part of healthy child development (see, for example, Gil, 1991; Kestly, 2014; Landreth, 2001; Schaefer, 1993; VanFleet et al., 2010). Play is important for children's intellectual, emotional, physical, and social development, and through play, children learn many important skills to support their healthy development.

# What is Parent-Child Play?

.....

*To simplify things, I will be using the term “parent” to indicate any caring adult who the child knows who could engage with them in play. So, for example, grandparents, aunts, uncles, extended family members, foster parents, adoptive parents, step-parents, and other caregivers can also be considered as appropriate play partners for children.*

.....

I define parent-child play as a parent and child engaging in a play activity interactively and face-to-face and where positive feelings are generated. Although children like to play by themselves and with other children, parent-child play is different and offers unique benefits to children.

Parent-child play is very different than child-child play and children’s solitary play. Children certainly enjoy playing with other children or on their own, and these types of play are also necessary for healthy child development. However, parent-child play offers unique benefits over child-child or independent play simply because parents are older, more mature, and have many more years of acquired knowledge and life experience. Parents thus are able to add something unique to their children’s play as more experienced play partners.

## Importance of parent-child play

Child development experts (see, for example, Maccoby & Martin, 1983) have focused on the importance of secure and positive parent-child relationships. They have found that a particular style of parenting, called authoritative parenting, results in the best outcomes for children. For example, children who receive authoritative parenting exhibit higher levels of self-reliance, self-regulation, curiosity, and cooperativeness (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Other styles of parenting have been identified that result in less positive outcomes for children. Permissive parents fail to set limits for appropriate behaviors, uninvolved parents are unresponsive and unavailable, and authoritarian parents are rigid and set very strict rules that have little reasoning behind them. Children who are parented with these parenting styles may have lower

self-confidence and self-esteem and less ability to self-regulate than children parented by authoritative parents (Maccoby & Martin, 1983).

Authoritative parenting is based on how parents can respond to their children in ways that meet their children's essential needs. Here are some of the essential needs of children that Brazelton and Greenspan (2000) have identified:

- A safe and stimulating environment
- Emotional warmth
- Attention
- Acceptance
- Encouragement
- Assistance
- Autonomy
- Structure and limits

The wonderful news is that parent-child play activities are an excellent way to meet these essential needs!

The parent-child attachment literature (see, for example, Booth & Jernberg, 2010; Cassidy, 1999) as well as recent research in neuroscience (Kestly, 2014; Norris & Rodwell, 2017) marks parent-child play as important. We have learned that children require many hundreds of positive face-to-face interactions with their parents on a regular and consistent basis for normal and healthy brain and nervous system development. These positive face-to-face interactions require the parent to be attentive, sensitive, and responsive to their child. When this happens, a positive and strong parent-child relationship develops, which leads to a healthy child. Again, parent-child play activities are an excellent way to provide these positive relational experiences to young children.



# Styles of Parent-Child Play

## One-to-one play

There are many different combinations of parent-child play. One parent may play with several children. For example, a mom may play with her younger and older daughter together, or a dad may play with his son and his son's friend, who are about the same age. Two parents could play with one or more children together. For example, two moms could play together with their only daughter, or with their twin sons and their son's friends.

However, there is one particular parent-child play combination, called one-to-one play, that goes a long way to create a special connection between parent and child. One-to-one play between one parent and one child is extremely important and is something that every child should have the opportunity to experience. The value with this type of play is that the parent is able to devote their full attention onto one child for a specific period of time. For a child to receive this kind of attention from a parent in the context of a play activity that generates lots of positive feelings is invaluable.

Another important distinction in play is whether the play is child-directed or parent-directed. These are important differences, so let's look in more detail at what each of these styles of play involve.

## Child-directed play

What do I mean when I say "child-directed play"? This is play where the child decides what to play with and how to play. A substitute phrase would be "child-led play." Sometimes the terms "unstructured," "free," or "self-directed" play are also used to indicate that the child is free to choose the play items and activities. Usually, when a child plays alone, they are free to choose the activities and play themes, so this would be viewed as child-directed play. Play between two or more children can also be child-directed, although the complexity of social interaction is added, as the children will negotiate amongst themselves to decide on what the play activities and themes will look like.

In the context of parent-child play, child-directed play happens when the child is in charge of the play activities and decides what toys to play with and how to play with these toys. The parent will be attentive and follow along, but will not direct or lead the play in any way. In other words, the parent is in a nondirective role. It is as if the child is the conductor of an orchestra and the

parent is one of the musicians following along according to the conductor's directions, or the child is the director of a play, and the parent is the actor following the director's guidance. Although unsafe or destructive behaviors are not allowed, children are given the opportunity to play with the toys in just about any way they choose. In child-directed play, the goal of the parent is to show interest and acceptance of the choices the child makes in playtime, with no specific task to be completed or no end goal other than enjoying each others' company.

Child-directed play has long been recommended by child development experts as a wonderfully healthy and beneficial way for children to play (Ginsburg, 2007; Landreth, 2012; VanFleet et al., 2010). When children are able to direct the play, they are able to make their own choices and decisions and experience a sense of control. Children generally have limited opportunities to feel in control because there are so many situations where they must be limited and restricted. However, children do need opportunities to be able to feel in control and to make choices and decisions since it is this feeling of being in control that is important for the development of children's self-esteem and self-identity.

Child-directed play is also recommended as being important for children's learning (Landreth, 2012; VanFleet et al., 2010). Child-directed play allows children the freedom to explore, use, and develop their imaginations and creative thinking skills. By doing so, children learn to solve problems, develop new ideas, and understand their worlds better.

## **Parent-directed play**

In the context of parent-child play, I use the term "parent-directed play" to distinguish child-directed play from the type of play where parents are more directive with their children. Other terms for this type of play would be "parent-led," "structured," or "mediated" play. Parent-directed play, by itself, is a term that encompasses a variety of meanings.

Parent-directed play can be viewed in somewhat of a negative light. It could be portrayed as a very structured, rigid, and rule-oriented way of parents playing with their children where the child is no longer free to explore and experiment with their own ideas or to develop their creative skills. If parents are very rule-oriented or take their teaching role too seriously, parent-directed play could fall into this category.

Play or activities that are parent-directed could also be seen as a parent filling up their child's life with various structured activities, leaving no room for free or unstructured time. We are learning that too many activities scheduled in a child's life is not healthy for a child's development (Ginsburg, 2007).

I am looking at parent-directed play in a more positive light. For a variety of reasons, not all children are able to initiate and maintain play activities as is the case in child-directed play. Some children may need more structure and direction from their parents in order to engage playfully with them. In parent-directed play, the parent structures the play activities for the child. The parent will take on a directive role by guiding the child in participating interactively together in the playtime. In parent-directed play, a parent may take on the role of supporter, assistant, helper, or even teacher to their child and will often support the child in mastering a task or achieving a specific goal. Parent-directed play is very common and is the type of play that many parents undertake with their children.



*This is an important point:*

*In the context of parent-child play, child-directed play is fundamentally different than parent-directed play. I believe it is important for parents to understand the difference between playing with their children in a child-directed way, where children decide what and how to play and parents follow their children's lead, and playing with their children in a parent-directed way, where parents structure and make decisions about the play activity and provide some degree of direction and guidance to their children.*



## **Are There Guidelines for Parent-Child Play?**

Parent-child play happens when parents and children play and have fun together. However, there have been minimal guidelines in the past on how parents can play effectively with their children. There are many, many ways for parents to play with their children and we understand more now that the way that parents play with their children is important. We have now found that certain ways of playing with children are more helpful in supporting

their healthy emotional development and strengthening the parent-child relationship, while other ways can be less helpful and even detrimental (Ginsburg, 2007).

## **Introducing: Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime!**

The guidelines for parent-child play I present in this book, which have been adapted from the play therapy and child development literature, can be used by parents to facilitate two separate approaches to or styles of parent-child play. One I have called **Child-Directed Playtime** and the other I have called **Parent-Directed Playtime**.

These guidelines will provide parents with a toolkit of practical “skills” to use. The skills that parents learn in this book are important parenting skills that focus on the following:

- Providing your child with positive attention
- Providing your child with opportunities to feel emotional warmth and experience positive feelings with you
- Providing your child with an accepting environment in which they feel understood
- Helping your child to internalize strengths rather than depend on external rewards
- Providing your child with opportunities to make choices and decisions and to become more independent and self-reliant
- Providing your child with guidance and support in developing physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills
- Helping your child feel safe and secure through appropriate boundaries and limitations

These skills are similar to those parenting skills used by authoritative parents, where parental warmth and acceptance are combined with appropriate structure and control (Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Such skills have been found to be the most effective way of raising socially and emotionally competent children. Authoritative parenting results in parenting that is neither too permissive nor too rigid.

These parenting skills are also based on attachment theory. Attachment theory strives to explain healthy, attuned interactions between parents and children that promote healthy brain development starting in infancy (Booth & Jernberg, 2010). It encourages parents to be sensitive and responsive to their children's needs and to support their children in developing emotional regulation skills. Attachment theory stresses the importance of the parent providing a safe and secure base from where the child can go to explore the world confidently.

The guidelines I have put together for Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will support parents in learning ways to play with their children so that both parents and children benefit. The guidelines I have put together:

- Are based on well-researched nondirective and directive play therapy approaches
- Would be suitable for almost any parent and child between the ages of three and ten years old
- Could be used at home
- Would help to strengthen the parent-child relationship
- Would encourage children's healthy development
- Would support parents in learning new parenting skills

Although I will be focusing on children between three and ten years old with these guidelines, the general principals involved in Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime are still applicable to children under three years and over ten years old.



*I wanted to let you know:*

*These guidelines take into account a multicultural approach to parent-child relationships. Although there are many different ways of parenting found in a variety of cultures, the guidelines for parents I suggest in this resource can be adapted for use in any culture and are based on universal principles of healthy human interactions, such as respect, empathy, and boundary setting.*



I am passionate about teaching parents to connect with their children and to help them strengthen their relationships. As a play therapist, I was drawn to the play therapy approaches that included parents in helping their children towards optimal development and recognized the enormous benefits of play for children, especially if the play involves their parents.

## **Benefits of Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime**

You may be wondering if it is worthwhile to engage in play activities with your child. What are the specific benefits of Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime? I have categorized these benefits into three sections:

- Supporting healthy child development
- Strengthening the parent-child relationship
- Increasing confidence in parenting skills

### **Supporting healthy child development**

Play is a child's natural way of learning about the world. With Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents are able to support and guide their children's development and acquisition of important skills in positive and healthy ways without being overly rigid, intrusive, or demanding. Parents can feel confident that engaging in Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will help enormously with the healthy development of their children by tapping into all the benefits of play in general that are now recognized by child development experts as being a necessary part of the healthy physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development of children (Kestly, 2014; Schaefer, 1993).

### **Promoting healthy brain and nervous system development**

Recent research in the field of neurobiology has found that the human brain is designed for relational activities, that is, activities with another person (Siegel & Bryson, 2012). Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will support the development of the area of the brain that is formed during the early months of infant development, specifically the preverbal level of development that focuses on face-to-face emotional communication, sensory

activities, movement, and rhythm for appropriate levels of stimulation to the brain areas involved in emotional regulation. Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime allow parents to provide opportunities to their children to engage in the valuable sensorimotor activities that play in general can provide.

The important concept here is that children require many positive relational interactions for healthy development. Playful activities between parent and child, such as those elicited through Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, provide these positive relational interactions and help the child's brain and nervous system grow appropriately, which is important for healthy emotional development, including the development of a child's skills for self-regulation.

### **Promoting healthy physical development**

With so many sedentary activities involving screens that are available for children these days, it becomes necessary for parents to ensure their children are engaging in play activities that involve movement and physical activity (Ginsburg, 2007). Play in general allows children to be active and Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will provide many opportunities for physical movement for children, using both their fine and gross motor skills.

### **Promoting healthy intellectual development**

Play is important for children's cognitive and intellectual development because it encourages thinking and problem-solving skills and also allows children to use their imaginations and to develop their creative skills (Schaefer, 1993). Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime allow children the freedom to use their imaginations and thinking skills creatively to learn about the world, to develop new ideas, and to solve problems.

### **Promoting healthy emotional development**

Children will become more self-aware of their own feelings and will begin to develop an emotional vocabulary during Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime because parents will identify and label their children's feelings. Parents will also acknowledge and accept these feelings, giving children the opportunity to safely express a wide range of feelings through the

play. When big feelings are safely expressed by children in an accepting environment, as happens during Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, these feelings decrease in intensity for the child (Schaefer, 1993).

Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will also tap into the therapeutic powers of play. Many normal situations for children, such as starting school, moving to a new neighborhood, or the birth of a sibling can be stressful. Play therapy, an approach where a trained play therapist helps a child using the therapeutic benefits of play, is a well-researched treatment of choice for children who have experienced difficult situations (Baggerly et al., 2010; Bratton et al., 2005; Cornett & Bratton, 2015; Ray & McCullough, 2016; Reddy et al., 2016). The good news is that parents are fully capable of providing some of these same therapeutic benefits of play to their children (VanFleet, 1994).

### **Promoting healthy social development**

Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will allow children to communicate their feelings, ideas, perceptions, conflicts, needs, and desires in a symbolic manner through play. Children are often unable to express themselves properly by using words or by talking to adults because the part of their brains responsible for language is not fully developed until late childhood or adolescence. Also, children are often unable to express abstract concepts meaningfully, such as why they are feeling a certain way, or what caused these feelings, again because of brain immaturity. Play is basically the language of childhood and is a natural way for children to express themselves (Landreth, 2012).

With Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, children learn the concept of relational interaction. In other words, children learn that back-and-forth interactions with their parents can be fun and enjoyable, which will support the healthy development of children's social skills in general.

Additionally, Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime encourage parents to use language when interacting with their children, which will ultimately support the development of their children's language and communication skills.



## **Strengthening the parent-child relationship**

Children learn about themselves and others initially through relationships with their parents. The quality of the relationship between parent and child is a major contributor to the child's ability to thrive physically and emotionally. Many research studies have shown that parent-child play is one of the most effective ways to build a strong relationship with your child (Baggerly et al., 2010; Bratton et al., 2005; Cornett & Bratton, 2015; Ray & McCullough, 2016; Reddy et al., 2016). When you enter your child's play world, it can be a truly special experience for both you and your child.

### **Fulfilling child's need for parental attention**

Children need focused, positive attention from their parents (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). One way Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime help to strengthen the parent-child relationship is by fulfilling a child's need for parental attention. During Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents learn to provide focused positive attention to their children. Children get the sense that their parents are interested in them and notice what they are doing and saying. Children feel that they are important and that they matter to their parents.

### **Fulfilling child's need for parental warmth, nurturance, and acceptance**

Warm, accepting, empathic, and nurturing relationships with parents are a crucial foundation not only for intellectual, emotional, and social growth in children, but also for the development of a strong and positive parent-child relationship (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). In Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents are encouraged to provide a warm, accepting, and nurturing play environment. Parents learn to be emotionally sensitive and to attune to their children by using their own empathic skills. Parents also learn to engage with their child in nurturing, accepting, and respectful ways so that children get the message that their parents hear, respect, and understand them. Play is especially fun for children when their parents are involved. All the positive feelings generated in playful interactions will go a long way in strengthening the parent-child relationship.

## **Fulfilling child's need for structure and limits**

In Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents will structure the playtime environment so that it is safe and age-appropriate and will limit any unsafe or destructive behaviors from the child. The message the child receives is that the parent is there to maintain a safe environment. This is important for a child's sense of safety and security, which is a crucial part of creating and building a strong parent-child relationship (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000; Landreth & Bratton, 2006).

Some children find it difficult to respect limits. The way that limits are set in Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime will allow these children to make their own appropriate choices and take responsibility for their actions during the play.

## **Helping to improve child's behaviors**

Why do parents want to have a strong, positive relationship with their children? One reason is to allow parents to be in a good position to teach skills to and to encourage positive behaviors in their children. The closer the bond and the stronger the relationship between parent and child, the more the child will value the relationship, and the more the child will want to please the parent and comply with the parent's requests in the real world (Brazelton & Greenspan, 2000). This means a better behaved child!

Developing and strengthening the connection between you and your child works better in the long run for teaching your child how to behave in socially appropriate ways than simple disciplinary behavioral management strategies of rewards and consequences (Siegel & Bryson, 2014). Parental discipline strategies of rewards and consequences do work and when used appropriately can be important ways to teach children. However, the strength of the parent-child relationship will determine the ultimate success of these discipline strategies.

## **Increasing confidence in parenting skills**

Many parents of children I was seeing in my play therapy practice reported that, before coming to see me, they felt uncomfortable playing with their children. Some parents felt unsure of themselves and felt they did not know how to successfully engage with their child in play. They felt they had lost their ability to play. Some parents felt they were never even given the chance

to play much themselves in childhood. Other parents felt bored and uninterested playing with their children or that engaging in playtime with their children was unimportant and pointless. After seeing me and learning some guidelines for how to engage in play with their children, parents reported feeling much more confident and motivated to play and reported having more playtimes at home with their children. This resulted in more playful face-to-face interactions together between parent and child, which is so very important for healthy child development.

Parenting can be stressful and difficult, even for the most dedicated and skillful parents. Parents are bombarded with information that can be overwhelming, contradictory, and hard to understand. When parents feel out of control, they begin to feel hopeless and inadequate. In Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents are given a “toolbox” of skills to use in play settings with their child that will strengthen the parent-child relationship as well as promote healthy intellectual, emotional, and physical development in their children. When parents know what to do, they are more likely to experience a sense of confidence.

In Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents develop healthy interaction patterns with their children. Once parents learn these new interaction skills in play, these skills can be easily generalized to real-life situations outside of the playtime.

VanFleet (1994) states that when parents are given some guidelines on how to play effectively with their children, they feel happier and more confident engaging with their children in positive face-to-face interactions. The more positive interactions between parent and child, the stronger the relationship becomes.

## **Are Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime Suitable for Everyone?**

### **Who can benefit from Child-Directed Playtime?**

Child-Directed Playtime is targeted at children between the ages of three to ten years old; however, younger or older children can also benefit from this approach. In fact, most children will benefit from Child-Directed Playtime. When given the opportunity to play in an unstructured yet safe manner, while their parent gives them full attention, almost any child will use their

natural play abilities and will initiate and maintain play activities that are imaginative and emotionally expressive.

Children who are highly directive will often benefit from Child-Directed Playtime, as it gives them opportunities to experience a sense of control. This may seem counterintuitive, but some children, for whatever reason, have a greater need to direct and control their environment, so Child-Directed Playtime gives them this opportunity (Yasenik & Gardner, 2012).

Although Child-Directed Playtime is beneficial and appropriate for many children, some children find it very difficult to initiate or maintain play activities, have difficulty inhibiting impulses that result in out of control behaviors, or may be too unfocused to engage in play for a specific period of time. These children may be more suited to a more structured and directive play approach such as Parent-Directed Playtime.

## **Who can benefit from Parent-Directed Playtime?**

As is the case with Child-Directed Playtime, Parent-Directed Playtime is targeted for children between the ages of three to ten years old, but older and younger children can also benefit from this approach. Parent-Directed Playtime can be especially beneficial for children requiring a more structured and organized type of play. Yasenik and Gardner (2012) have identified that the children who would especially benefit from this approach include those who are:

- Withdrawn or are hesitant to interact
- Anxious or unsure and have trouble making choices and decisions
- Unfocused and inattentive and have highly fragmented play
- Highly aroused or have difficulty inhibiting impulses with resulting out of control behaviors
- Unable to initiate and maintain interactive and regulated play
- Lacking in play skills because of a delay in play development
- Highly constricted physically or emotionally

Additionally, some parents may want to initiate specific learning objectives for their child through play activities, such as teaching their child how to play a game, guiding their child in developing imaginary play skills, or supporting

their child in developing focus and attention skills. In this case, Parent-Directed Playtime would be more appropriate than Child-Directed Playtime.

## **When are Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime not suitable?**

Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime would not be suitable for parents who have recently experienced a traumatic event, or for parents who are currently struggling with their own mental health or addiction issues. Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime would also not be suitable for parents who are current victims or perpetrators of family violence/abuse. In these cases, individual counselling therapy and/or specialized programs for the parent(s) and separate individual play therapy/counselling for the child would be recommended until things have stabilized. When things have stabilized in the family, then Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime can be an excellent activity for children.

Children who have experienced a recent trauma or significant loss should be seen by a child therapist for individual counselling/play therapy and the parents should be in supportive counselling as well. After this initial support, Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime can be an excellent activity for children to move forward along a “normal” developmental path.

## **When to seek professional help**

The following scenarios during Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime may indicate a need for a parent to seek professional help from a child therapist, play therapist, family physician, pediatrician, child psychologist, or child psychiatrist:

- If your child is unable to stay emotionally regulated and continually gets emotionally over-aroused and out of control during playtime
- If your child continually ignores and rejects you during playtime
- If you notice over time that your child is stuck in play, compulsively repeating negative play themes that are disturbing and end in a negative manner with no resolution or changes happening in the play

# About This Book

**Chapter 2** will discuss the basic framework for playtime and some foundations for parent-child play upon which the rest of the book will build, including defining “Directive” and “Non-Directive” roles in playtime.

**Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 8** will focus on the various “skills” that will help you get into a particular role, either Directive or Nondirective, in order to facilitate Parent-Directed or Child-Directed Playtime.

- Chapter 3 will describe in detail the Empathic Skills (used for both Child-Directed and Parent-Directed Playtimes)
- Chapter 4 will describe in detail the Autonomy Skills (used only for Child-Directed Playtime)
- Chapter 5 will describe in detail the Limit-Setting Skill (used for both Child-Directed and Parent-Directed Playtimes)
- Chapter 8 will describe in detail the Play Structuring Skills (used only for Parent-Directed Playtime)

In these chapters, I go over each skill in detail and provide examples and additional information on how to use that particular skill. I also go over the reasons for using this particular skill, which ties in to the benefits I have identified for Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime earlier in Chapter 1. There is a lot of information in these chapters and I recommend that you browse through each of the skills initially just to get a general idea of each skill.

I have included many examples of what you could say to your child specifically. Please don't feel as if you have to repeat these examples verbatim! There is no need to memorize these examples; I am providing them to give you some ideas to use with your own child. The examples I am using are similar to ways I would have responded to children in my playroom when I was working as a play therapist and are similar to the ways I am now responding to my own grandchildren.

Although my words may appear awkward to you at first, I encourage you to try them out with your child and see how they feel to you. You will develop your own style based on the examples I have provided. Experiment with the examples using different words, tones of voice, emphasis, and projected

emotional intensity. The more comfortable you feel with these words, the more comfortable your child will feel.

When you begin to use these skills, it is as if you are learning a new language to communicate with your child. These new skills can seem very challenging to apply at first, but with practice, they will become easier and feel more natural to you. The more you use the skills, the more natural it will feel and sound as you develop your own style.

To help you in learning, at the end of the description for each skill I have provided a **Getting Started Activity** to help you practice using each of the skills. A good way to start getting used to the various skills is to practice them individually in everyday life situations. To do this, depending on when you have a few minutes free from distractions and what you are observing your child doing, you would pick an appropriate skill or skills to work on and engage in the Getting Started Activity with your child.

The advantage of practicing this way is that you can decide fairly spontaneously when to practice these skills. All you need is a few minutes of uninterrupted time so you can devote your full attention to your child. You could easily practice several times every day because you are only doing it for a few minutes. Remember, the more you practice these skills, the easier and more natural they will seem.

I have also included a **Parent Self-Monitoring** form for you to use after each Getting Started Activity. If you want, you can use these forms to reflect on and monitor your feelings, especially as you begin to use these skills with your child. In these monitoring forms, I have broken down each skill into various components so that you can identify what parts of the skill you feel comfortable with and what parts feel awkward and uncomfortable. These self-monitoring exercises are in no way to be evaluative and they are not meant to make you feel like you are not being successful in using the skills. They are meant to be supportive and educational by identifying the various components of each skill in a concise manner. I have included them because parents I have worked with over the years often told me that they liked using the self-monitoring exercises as a brief summary of each skill.

Once you are familiar with the various skills and have had a chance to practice them individually, you are ready to “put it all together” and have an actual playtime with your child where you would have the option to use all of the skills. **Chapters 6 and 9** will, respectively, present the step-by-step

guidelines for conducting a Child-Directed or Parent-Directed Playtime session with your child. I would recommend getting familiar with using each of the skills individually at first before trying to combine them all in one playtime. I also recommend reading **Chapters 7 and 10** on how to set up and equip a play area for each style of play.

**Chapters 11, 12, 13, and 14** all deal with Advanced Playtime topics, such as understanding more about children's play, when to switch from one style of play to another, generalizing play skills to real life, and using play to reduce anxiety in your child. These are all advanced topics and require that you are familiar with the earlier chapters in this book.

Please don't feel overwhelmed with the amount of information that is being presented to you. Start slowly in small increments. Monitor your feelings as you use the skills. Understand that you are learning a whole new way of interacting with your child and this will take time. You will not feel comfortable using all the skills right away, so don't feel discouraged. The best thing you can do is to remember that what you are learning with these skills is an amazing way of interacting and connecting with your child.



# Chapter 2:

## The Basic Framework for Playtime

### Parental Roles and Skills

A child at play is doing many things all at once, and most parents agree that playtime with their child can get very complicated and can go in many different directions. There is no one specific way that children will play. Some children like to dress up and pretend to be someone else. Some children like to play in an imaginary way using toy figures or characters to play out a story. Some children like to build or construct things. Some children like to draw. Some children like to play games. This makes it complicated to provide specific “rules” for playing with children.

In developing guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, I have come up with a basic framework that is based on parental roles and parental skills in order to simplify a topic that could be very complex!

### Parental roles

I have identified two general “roles” that parents can take on during playtime:

- **Directive Role**
- **Nondirective Role**

I like to imagine the Directive Role and the Nondirective Role existing as two sides of a coin. During playtime, parents will put themselves on either one or the other side of the coin, meaning a parent could be in a Directive Role or in a Nondirective Role, but not both at the same time!

When parents put themselves into a Directive Role, they will lead, structure, or direct certain aspects of the play. In a Nondirective Role, parents will let their children direct the play activities and will follow their children's directions (as long as play remains safe and non-destructive).

My intent with this book is to highlight to parents a fundamental and extremely important distinction about parent-child play. This distinction, well-known in the field of play therapy, focuses on whether to take on a Directive or a Nondirective Role when interacting with children. How to distinguish between these two roles has not always been made clear to parents, and this is what I strive to do with this book.

## **Parental skills**

To support parents in getting into a particular role, either Directive or Nondirective, I have identified a number of “skills” that parents will use during playtime:

### **Nondirective Role Skills**

These skills will support parents in getting into a Nondirective Role:

- **Autonomy Skills**
  - The Independence Skill—allow your child to make choices and decisions
  - The Following Directions Skill—follow your child's directions
- **Empathic Skills**
  - The Describing Skill—describe your child's behaviors
  - The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child's feelings
  - The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
  - The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child's strengths and efforts

### **Directive Role Skills**

These skills will support parents in getting into a Directive Role:

- **Play Structuring Skills**

- The Engagement Skill—stimulate and engage your child in play
- The Regulating Skill—regulate your child’s arousal level
- The Limit-Setting Skill—limit unsafe and destructive behaviors

.....

*Here’s something important to keep in mind:*

*Whether you are in a Directive Role or a Nondirective Role will determine the style (either parent-directed or child-directed) of parent-child play that you are facilitating.*

.....

## Child-Directed Playtime Roles and Skills

The overarching role that parents take on in **Child-Directed Playtime** is a **Nondirective Role**. Parents will use the **Autonomy Skills** and **Empathic Skills** for the entire playtime to let their children lead and direct the play activities. Parents will only **temporarily** step into a **Directive Role** to limit their children’s unsafe or destructive behaviors using the **Limit-Setting Skill**, and then return to a **Nondirective Role**.

### **Nondirective Role Skills (used for the entire playtime)**

- Autonomy Skills (unique to Child-Directed Playtime)
  - The Independence Skill—allow your child to make choices and decisions
  - The Following Directions Skill—follow your child’s directions
- Empathic Skills
  - The Describing Skill—describe your child’s behaviors
  - The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child’s feelings
  - The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
  - The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child’s strengths and efforts

## **Directive Role Skill (used only temporarily to keep the play safe)**

- The Limit-Setting Skill—limit unsafe and destructive behaviors

## **The Nondirective Role**

As mentioned above, the Nondirective Role for parents is an overarching role in Child-Directed Playtime and is something that parents should keep in mind throughout the entire playtime.

Basically, in this role, you:

- Refrain from doing certain things (as long as the play remains safe and non-destructive), such as
  - telling or suggesting to your child what to do
  - teaching, evaluating, or correcting your child
  - asking questions to your child
  - praising your child
- Encourage your child to make choices and decisions, to problem solve, and to be the leader of the playtime
- Follow your child's directions as long as the play remains safe and non-destructive
- Use your empathy skills to attune to and understand your child

I found over the years of working with families that for many parents, being in a Nondirective Role is very difficult. In many ways, this skill goes against generally accepted parenting concepts. Teach and guide your child! Don't let your child boss you around to get their way! Help your child learn and play by the rules! These parenting concepts are all valid and appropriate in everyday life and parents are encouraged to use them. However, being in a Nondirective Role for Child-Directed Playtime is a different way of interacting with your child that allows you to take on a different role than in normal day-to-day life.

The Nondirective Role requires a shift in thinking for parents. Most parents I worked with found it very difficult and challenging at first to stay in the Nondirective Role by NOT telling their child what to do or not do, by NOT asking questions to or praising their child, by NOT stepping in

immediately to take over for their child, and by ALLOWING their children to give them directions.

Parents are often encouraged to play with their children in a fairly directive way by suggesting to their child what to play with, demonstrating how to do things, assisting in mastering tasks, asking lots of questions, teaching the rules of a game, or praising achievements, and parents are usually happy to engage with their children in this manner. However, in Child-Directed Playtime, this directive parent involvement is not appropriate. The focus with Child-Directed Playtime is on showing interest in your child's activities and accepting your child's choices and decisions in play (as long as they are safe and non-destructive), even if you would choose to make different decisions.

It can be very difficult for many parents to "back off" and allow their children to take control when it is appropriate to do so or to allow natural consequences to happen. Often, parents feel they must be teaching their children something or be the ones in control at all times. Yes, parents do need to teach and correct their children at certain times and are ultimately in control. However, there are situations where it is appropriate to accept your child's choices, and Child-Directed Playtime is one of those situations.

Children may also be somewhat hesitant or resistant at first with their parents in a Nondirective Role. This may be a different experience for them as well. With their parents being less directive, some children are unsure about what and how to play, as they may have relied on their parents' suggestions and directions for play activities in past.



*Here's an important point to keep in mind:*

*Being in a Nondirective Role in Child-Directed Playtime does not mean being uninvolved in your child's play! Being in a Nondirective Role means you are still engaging with your child by providing focused attention, acknowledging feelings and desires non-judgementally, and accepting your child's choices and decisions when appropriate.*



# Parent-Directed Playtime Roles and Skills

The overarching role that parents take on in **Parent-Directed Playtime** is a **Directive Role**. Parents will use the **Play Structuring Skills** for the entire playtime to engage, regulate, and guide their children in play activities and the **Limit-Setting Skill** to limit any unsafe or destructive behaviors. Throughout the playtime, parents will **temporarily** step into a **Nondirective Role** and use the **Empathic Skills** to attune to and connect with their children, and then return to a **Directive Role**.

## Directive Role Skills (used for the entire playtime)

- Play Structuring Skills (unique to Parent-Directed Playtime)
  - The Engagement Skill—stimulate and engage your child in play
  - The Regulating Skill—regulate your child’s arousal level
- The Limit-Setting Skill—limit unsafe and destructive behaviors

## Nondirective Role Empathic Skills (interspersed throughout playtime, when appropriate, to connect with your child)

- Empathic Skills
  - The Describing Skill—describe your child’s behaviors
  - The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child’s feelings
  - The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
  - The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child’s strengths and efforts

## The Directive Role

I found over the years working with parents and children that parents generally found playing with their children in a Directive Role using parent-directed play strategies to be quite natural and familiar. This, I think, is because parents are generally encouraged to take charge and to guide and teach their children, even during playtime. Most parents I worked with put themselves into a Directive Role naturally when they played with their children and it

was difficult for many parents to put themselves into a Nondirective Role when I was teaching them child-directed play strategies.

When you put yourself in a Directive Role for Parent-Directed Playtime, however, there is a fine balance between maintaining parental control and being somewhat flexible with your child so that you are not overly rigid in your directions. It can be very tricky to decide when to maintain your structure and directions firmly and when to be somewhat flexible in your demands. Each situation will be different and will depend on many factors. This is where your parental judgement comes into play.

Although you want to maintain some structure and control in Parent-Directed Playtime, at the same time, you need to keep things fun and playful! Increase elements of surprise and novelty to keep your child engaged in the activity. Try a new activity to spark your child's interest and cooperation. Remember not to be too rigid, critical, or overly demanding about doing things only your way. When this happens, your child may resist, lose interest, or disengage from the play. Be adaptable and flexible as necessary. You may even want to switch to a more child-directed play approach. You can always switch back to a more parent-directed approach later.

## **Using the Empathic Skills in Parent-Directed Playtime**

When you are in in a Directive Role facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime, it is important to remember that you can also intersperse the Nondirective Role Empathic Skills throughout the playtime. As a reminder, the Empathic Skills are:

- The Describing Skill—describe your child's behaviors
- The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child's feelings
- The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
- The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child's strengths and efforts

The Empathic Skills are very important not only in Child-Directed Playtime, but also in Parent-Directed Playtime. Even though you are putting yourself in a Directive Role for Parent-Directed Playtime to engage, regulate, limit, or guide your child in some way, you are also encouraged to use the Empathic Skills to connect emotionally with and attune to your child. Using

the Empathic Skills, you are striving to understand and acknowledge your child's feelings, perceptions, and experiences. By doing this you are sending an extremely powerful message of acceptance to your child, which goes a long way in building a strong and positive parent-child relationship.



*Here's something to think about:*

*Being in a Directive Role in Parent-Directed Playtime does not prevent you from using the Empathic Skills to attune to and connect with your child. With Parent-Directed Playtime, you are still striving to connect with your child using the Empathic Skills. This is what makes Parent-Directed Playtime unique: structured and empathic interactions are combined.*



## Differences Between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime

When I worked as a play therapist seeing children who were struggling with emotional and behavioral problems or who had experienced a difficult situation, I also worked with the children's parents (or caregivers). Many times, I would support them in learning ways to connect with their children through play activities. To make things simple, I would teach the two different styles of parent-child play I have highlighted in this book: child-directed and parent-directed. Generally, I would choose the style of play that was most suited to a particular family; however, I knew that both styles of play were beneficial to children and parents in different ways.

I want to reinforce the idea that neither style of parent-child play is "better" than the other. At certain times, Child-Directed Playtime can be useful to allow children to feel a sense of control and independence in the playtime, and at other times, Parent-Directed Playtime can be useful to support and guide children more directly in playtime. I believe it is important for parents to be able to distinguish when they are taking on a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime and when they are taking on a Directive Role to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime because each of these styles of play have unique benefits.



Knowing when to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime and when to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime means being able to distinguish between these two different styles of parent-child play and understanding exactly what is involved when you facilitate either style.

In **Child-Directed Playtime** you will:

- Let your child lead, direct, and take control of the playtime
- Refrain from directing, making suggestions to, or correcting your child (unless behavior is unsafe or destructive)
- Allow your child opportunities to express a wide range of feelings and to communicate ideas, perceptions, needs, and desires
- Provide your child with opportunities to make decisions and choices without being directed by you
- Allow your child to experience a sense of control
- Connect empathically with your child and strive to understand and acknowledge their experiences
- Encourage and empower your child
- Support your child without taking over
- Switch temporarily to a Directive Role to limit unsafe or destructive behaviors, then return to a Nondirective Role
- In general, provide your child with an environment of acceptance

With Child-Directed Playtime, your goal is not to teach or guide your child; instead, you are supporting your child by letting them know that you value and respect their choices and decisions.



*Here's something that might interest you:*

*Similar to Child-Directed Playtime, where a child is able to freely choose the play activity, baby-led weaning is a popular method of introducing a baby to solid food after six months of age. Instead of being spoon-fed pureed foods by the parent, the baby is offered a range of appropriate foods they can freely choose and explore.*



In **Parent-Directed Playtime** you will:

- Structure the playtime with a specific objective in mind to support your child's needs
- Challenge, guide, and support the development of your child's physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills through play
- Choose and initiate a play activity that is interesting and challenging, but not so challenging as to be overwhelming and frustrating
- Encourage and stimulate your child to engage in and maintain interactive play with you
- Regulate your child's emotional arousal level
- Guide your child by giving information and clear directions, providing support and encouragement as needed, and positively reinforcing mastery of new skills
- Connect empathically with your child and strive to understand their experiences
- Limit unsafe or destructive behaviors
- In general, support your child in engaging in positive and regulated interactive play together

With Parent-Directed Playtime, you are supporting your child in learning or mastering something new through a positive play environment.

## Stay in an Adult Role

In both Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, parents need to stay in an adult role. Although you are engaging playfully and enthusiastically with your child during playtime, don't put yourself in the role of a child like your child's sibling, friend, or peer. For example:

- Be competitive enough to keep the game or activity fun for your child, but don't be overly competitive with your child as another child might be.

- Don't put your child in the role of the adult by expecting your child to make you feel good, to entertain you, or to take care of your needs.
- Although it is important to be playful with your child, be careful not to tease, mock, or humiliate your child, and do not let joking around become overwhelming, uncomfortable, or even hurtful for your child.
- When you are playfully engaging with your child, the play can sometimes become quite active and even involve physical contact between parent and child. Be attuned to your child, and when they are beginning to find things too stimulating, reduce the stimulation level so that your child remains in a regulated emotional state.
- Be aware when your child is saying "no" or "stop" and respect their wishes, especially around physical contact such as tickling or holding.

In summary, be sensitive and responsive to your child's feelings, likes, dislikes, and needs. Learn to understand what your child needs: directions, instructions, stimulation, soothing, calming, independence, or assistance.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter we looked at the basic framework for playtime by identifying two mutually exclusive parental roles, the Directive Role and the Nondirective Role, that parents will take on during playtime. We also identified nine separate parental skills that will support parents in getting into a particular role. We learned that for Child-Directed Playtime, parents will put themselves mainly into a Nondirective Role and for Parent-Directed Playtime, parents will put themselves mainly into a Directive Role. We also began to get a sense of what some of the differences are between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime and some ideas of what parents will do in each style of playtime. Finally, even though parents need to engage playfully with their children, they do need to stay in an adult role during playtime.

# Part II

## Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime

# Chapter 3:

## The Empathic Skills

In this chapter, I will highlight the Empathic Skills. These four Nondirective Role Skills are very important and, when used with the Autonomy Skills, will support parents in getting into a Nondirective Role for Child-Directed Playtime. The Empathic Skills are also used in Parent-Directed Playtime and can be interspersed with the Directive Role Play Structuring Skills.

These skills are important because they “connect” parents and children, strengthening their relationships and bringing them together in many different ways. The four Empathic Skills are:

- The Describing Skill—describe your child’s behaviors
- The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child’s feelings
- The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
- The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child’s strengths and efforts

The objective of using the Empathic Skills is to **notice and objectively acknowledge your child’s actions, feelings, words, and strengths so that your child feels understood and accepted.** By using the Empathic Skills, parents are attuning to their children and striving to understand their children’s play experiences, ultimately providing their children with an environment of acceptance. I am excited to present to you in this chapter the details on using the Empathic Skills.

In the child development literature, we learn that children attach and form secure and positive relationships to their parents starting in infancy when the parent is available, attentive, sensitive, and responsive (Brisch, 2002). This means that in infancy, parents need to be sensitive to and understanding of their infants' feelings, preferences, and needs without having to ask questions to their baby. Parents show the baby they understand by responding appropriately to the baby.

As children grow older, it is very important for parents to continue to be sensitive to their children by using their own empathic abilities to attune emotionally to and understand their children. Empathy is the ability to understand others' feelings and perspectives. It is important because it helps us respond appropriately to and build social connections with others. Your ability to understand your child by using your empathic abilities is crucial for the healthy development of your child and the development of a strong and connected parent-child relationship.

Showing empathy to your child helps achieve some basic human needs:

- **Feeling understood** is a basic human need and children need to feel understood by their parents. The important part of showing empathy to your child is that you want to pick up on how your child is feeling without having to ask them directly, "How are you feeling?"
- **Feeling accepted** is also a basic human need and parents should show acceptance towards their children. Of course, inappropriate behaviors would not be accepted, but other things your child does, feels, or says can be acknowledged and accepted by you rather than being evaluated or corrected by you.

How can you show empathy towards your child? By providing an environment of understanding and acceptance. Pay attention to, watch, and listen to your child. Then, communicate your understanding and acceptance to your child.

This is the reason for using the Empathic Skills in playtime. You will use your own empathic abilities, attune emotionally to your child during the playtime, and focus on identifying, understanding, accepting, and acknowledging your child's feelings, perceptions, preferences, and experiences. When this happens, a strong and secure parent-child relationship will develop.

Empathy is a skill that can be learned, practiced, and developed, but to learn about empathy, you first need to be shown empathy from others. That is why it is so important for parents to show empathy to their children on a regular and consistent basis: it helps their children to develop empathy themselves.

When children experience understanding and acceptance from their parents, they feel safe and are able to explore their worlds and develop their creativity, imagination, and problem-solving abilities. In addition, this acceptance and acknowledgment from parents is extremely important in helping a child develop a positive sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

## **Empathic Skill #1: The Describing Skill**

### **How Do You Use This Skill?**

The objective of the Describing Skill is to watch your child and **describe your child's actions and play activities** out loud using neutral, non-judgemental statements. These are called **Describing Statements**.

The frequency of these Describing Statements should be such that there are no long, uncomfortable silences, but not so frequent as to sound unnatural and irritating.

Remember, make neutral, objective, non-judgemental statements. Describe only your observations. It is like you are a sports play-by-play announcer or you are describing to someone who is in another room what your child is doing. Do not try to judge or interpret what your child is doing.

### **Examples of Using the Describing Skill**

- The child is stacking blocks on top of each other; the parent could say, "Now you are stacking the blocks on top of each other."
- The child puts a little girl doll into a car; the parent could say, "You're putting her into the car now."
- The child has drawn a blue circle; the parent could say, "You drew a blue circle right in the middle of the page."
- The child is building something with blocks; the parent could say, "I can see that you're trying to fit that piece in there."

- The child is dressing up and putting on a hat; the parent could say, “Oh, now you are going to put on that hat.”
- The child has put a knight character in the castle; the parent could say, “I see that the knight is in the castle.”
- The child is looking for a particular block; the parent could say, “You’re looking for another block.”
- The child is lining up the animals on the floor; the parent could say, “Now you are lining them all up.”
- The child is crashing two cars together; the parent could say, “That car just crashed right into the other car.”
- The child is using their voice to make the dragon roar; the parent could say, “I’m noticing that the dragon is making lots of noise.”
- The child is making crying noises for the baby doll; the parent could say, “Now the baby is crying.”
- The child has taken out several balls; the parent could say, “Ahh, you chose to use those balls today.”
- The child is getting paper and crayons out; the parent could say, “Looks like you are getting ready to draw a picture.”

## Tips for Using the Describing Skill

Here are some tips for using the Describing Skill:

- Refrain from asking questions
- Use the Limit-Setting Skill as needed
- Let your child label things

### No questions asked

DO NOT ask questions about your child’s actions or play activities! There is no need to try to figure out what the play is all about, or the meaning of what your child is trying to play out. Just observe, describe, and let the play unfold. Asking questions can be good in many situations with your child outside of Child-Directed Playtime, especially if you are helping your child



learn about things; however, during Child-Directed Playtime, you are trying to be truly empathic and striving to understand without questioning.

.....  
*Please see more discussion around refraining from asking questions under the Independence Skill below.*  
.....

## Limit unsafe or destructive behaviors

You would NOT use the Describing Skill if your child is doing something unsafe or destructive. In that case, you would temporarily step into a Directive Role and use the Limit-Setting Skill to stop the inappropriate behavior, and then return to a Nondirective Role. However, for normal and appropriate actions and play activities carried out by your child, you can use the Describing Skill to communicate to your child that you are paying close attention and you are noticing, interested in, and accepting of what your child is doing.

## Not labelling toys

Wait until your child labels a particular item that is being played with before you label it. For example, if your child is playing with a small box and moving it around on the floor quickly, you may be unsure of what your child is pretending that the box is. In Child-Directed Playtime, you would not ask your child what the box was, but you would initially label the item ambiguously (“You are moving *that* around really fast,” labelling the box as “that”), and you would wait for your child to put a label on the box (for example, your child says, “This car is driving fast”; now you know the box is a car). By doing this, you are letting your child use their imagination freely without you directing your child on what you think something should be.

Here are some examples of phrases that could be used when you do not know what something represents to your child:

- “Now you are making **it** bigger.”
- “You decided to put **that** in **there**.”
- “**That one** is going over **there**.”

- “There are two of **them**.”
- “You’re putting those two **things** together.”

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*I wanted to let you know:*

*I consider the Describing Skill as the most basic skill for Child-Directed Playtime. This skill can generally be used to start the playtime and pretty well throughout the entire playtime. With the Describing Skill, you are not waiting for your child to do something specific; you are merely making observational statements out loud by tracking what your child is doing. I like the Describing Skill because even if a child is not saying anything to me and is playing fairly independently, I can still be engaged in the play by showing the child I am interested in what they are doing by using this skill. This also prevents long, uncomfortable silences from happening. Over the years, I observed that parents found this skill fairly straightforward and easy to use, although it did seem awkward and unnecessary at first to many parents. Why would you just describe out loud what your child is doing? I felt the same thing when I was learning child-directed play skills. However, it very quickly became a natural way for me to interact with children, and to this day, I find I frequently use Describing Statements to interact with children.*

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## Why Use the Describing Skill?

One reason for using the Describing Skill is that by making non-judgemental, neutral, observational statements about your child’s activities, you are sending a message to your child that you are interested in what they are doing and you are paying close attention to their activities. Children need to know that their parents are genuinely interested in them and what they are doing. Most children will try to get their parents’ attention, and if consistently unsuccessful, will seek attention from their parents in negative ways. The Describing Skill will allow your child to feel they are important to you and that you are interested in what they are saying and doing.

Another reason for using the Describing Skill is that you are not judging your child’s play activities as good nor bad, but rather just noticing with

interest what your child is doing. Because you are using neutral and non-judgemental statements in describing your child's activities with this skill, your child gets the message that what they are doing is acceptable to you, the parent. When your child can freely choose or decide on what and how to play, and you accept these choices, your child will develop a strong and positive sense of self, knowing that you are accepting of their choices. Children accept themselves when they feel accepted by their parents.

One other very important reason for using the Describing Skill is that by verbally describing out loud what your child is doing, you are also helping your child with language development. It has been found that parents who talk regularly to their children will have children with more advanced verbal and language skills as they grow and develop.

## Getting Started Activity #1: Practice Using the Describing Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Nondirective Role. You will be focusing on the Describing Skill, but will also be keeping in mind the Independence Skill. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 ahead of time.

**Instructions:** Watch your child throughout the day, and when your child is engaged in play independently, put aside five to ten minutes of your time where you are free from distractions.

Position yourself appropriately. Watch your child and, using the Describing Skill, make Describing Statements that describe objectively what you see your child doing and what is happening in the play. Describe what you see neutrally and objectively without trying to interpret what is happening. It is as if you are describing to someone in another room what your child is doing and what is happening in the play. Space your Describing Statements out so that there are no long, uncomfortable silences, but also so that you are not making the statements quickly one right after the other.

Also, keeping in mind the Independence Skill, allow your child opportunities to decide what to do and how to do it. Keep the following in mind:

- Do not tell your child what to do or not do (unless you notice unsafe or destructive behavior)

- Do not make any suggestions
- Do not make any judgements
- Do not teach or correct your child
- Do not ask questions to your child

Afterwards, reflect on this activity and how you felt doing it and how your child responded. Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form below to help you reflect.

### Parent Self-Monitoring: The Describing Skill

During playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

I watch my child, notice what my child is doing, and make observational, non-judgemental statements, called Describing Statements, out loud to describe what my child is doing or what is happening during the play.

0 10

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With this skill, I am not asking any questions to my child about what they are doing or what is happening in the play.

0 10

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With this skill, I am not giving any directions, instructions, or making any corrections or judgements on what my child is doing or what is happening in the play.

0 10

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I am identifying the toy or play object my child is using ambiguously at first if I do not know what it is supposed to be; in other words, I am not labelling toys or play materials before my child identifies what these items are.

0 10

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If I am noticing unsafe or destructive behavior from my child, I am not using this skill, but am using the Limit-Setting Skill instead to stop the behaviors.

0

10

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## Empathic Skill #2: The Feelings Identification Skill

### How Do You Use This Skill?

The objective of the Feelings Identification Skill is to watch your child's face and body language, and when you notice a feeling coming up in your child, or a feeling being expressed through the toys, think to yourself and **identify the feeling or emotion that your child is experiencing or expressing** without asking your child a question. Then make a non-judgemental statement out loud to your child that identifies that specific feeling. This is called a **Feelings Identification Statement**.

### Examples of Using the Feelings Identification Skill

#### When your child is expressing feelings directly:

- The child is closely examining and manipulating a truck; the parent could say, "I can see you're feeling really **curious** about that truck."
- The child is looking puzzled at a half-built Lego car he has been working on; the parent could say, "Looks like you're feeling **confused**."
- The child smiles on finding a particular car; the parent could say, "You're **happy** to find that car."
- The child is just sitting on the floor and aimlessly moving a car around; the parent could say, "It looks like you're feeling **bored**."
- The child is startled somewhat when a toy falls off the shelf; the parent could say, "That kind of **surprised** you!"

- The child is starting to aggressively force blocks together; the parent could say, “I see it’s **frustrating** for you when it won’t fit.”
- The child finds a toy she has been looking for and jumps up shouting “Hooray!”; the parent could say, “It looks like you’re feeling really **excited** to see that.”
- The child has just broken a toy by mistake and starts yelling; the parent could say, “You’re really **angry** that the toy broke.”
- The child has finished a picture and is happily looking at it; the parent could say, “You’re feeling **proud** of your painting.”
- The child is building a tower of blocks carefully and looks as if to cry when it falls over; the parent could say, “Ohh, you’re **sad** that it fell over.”

**When your child is expressing feelings indirectly through toys or pretending to be another character:**

- The child is moving the puppet around wildly in the air; the parent could say, “Looks like that puppet is feeling **silly** today.”
- The child aggressively knocks down another soldier with a soldier he is holding; the parent could say, “That soldier looks like he is really **angry** with the other soldier.”
- The child is making the monkey look under the pillow; the parent could say, “The monkey is feeling **curious** about what is under the pillow.”
- The child is dressed up pretending to be a pirate and is making herself look big and powerful; the parent could say, “Wow, that pirate sure looks like she’s feeling very **brave!**”
- The child moves a kitten toy quickly out of the way after moving a tiger toy closer to the kitten; the parent could say, “That little kitten looks **afraid** of the big tiger.”
- The child has set up a Playmobil woman and baby and is pretending that the woman (mommy) is sad her baby is sick; the parent could say, “That mommy seems very **sad** that her baby is sick.”

- The child is pretending that the spaceship and astronauts went to explore an unknown planet; the parent could say, “That looks like a dangerous place the astronauts are going to. They look like they’re feeling kind of **scared**.”
- The child is pretending to be a mommy and is giving the baby doll a kiss; the parent could say, “Looks like Mommy is feeling very **loving** to her baby.”
- The child has made several stuffed dogs come together and is making them bark happily; the parent could say, “The dogs are **happy** to be together and have fun.”
- The child is pretending that several princesses have been looking for their jewels and seem to be unhappy because they cannot find them; the parent could say, “The princesses seem to be feeling **sad** that they can’t find their magic jewels.”

## Tips for Using the Feelings Identification Skill

Here are some tips for using the Feelings Identification Skill:

- Identify other experiences
- Refrain from asking questions
- Use your own empathic abilities
- Identify both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings

### Identify other things your child may be experiencing

You can use this skill to identify not only specific feelings, but also other things you are noticing in your child, such as **likes, dislikes, desires, wishes, preferences, perceptions, and anything else your child is experiencing internally**. You would make a statement to your child similar to a Feelings Identification Statement.

Examples of what you could say to identify what your child is experiencing:

- “I can see you really **like** playing this game!”

- “You **don’t like** it when the marbles get stuck.”
- “You **want** those blocks to fit together.”
- “You **don’t want** to put the hat on the doll today.”
- “You really **wish** that car would stay there.”
- “You **wish** that pirate had a sword.”
- “It looks really **hard for you** to balance on one foot!”
- “That was **easy for you**.”
- “You’re **not sure** about how that works.”
- “You’re **wondering** if it is okay to do that.”
- “That’s **difficult for you**.”
- “That’s **not how you wanted** that to go.”
- “That puppy **likes** playing with the kitten.”
- “The king **wants** the castle door closed.”
- “The princesses **wish** they could go on the train.”

## Refrain from asking questions

You are NOT asking your child a question about their feelings. For example, you would NOT ask:

- “Are you feeling sad?”
- “How are you feeling?”
- “How is the puppy feeling?”
- “Do you like playing this game?”
- “Why don’t you want to put the hat on today?”

Instead, you are making a statement about what you are noticing. For example, you could say:

- “I notice you look sad.”
- “I can see you are feeling very happy.”



- “I’m noticing the puppy looks scared.”
- “I can see you like playing this game.”
- “Looks like you don’t want to wear the hat today.”

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*Please see more of a discussion around refraining from asking questions under the Independence Skill below.*

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## **Use your own empathic abilities**

Something to remember is that children do not often express their feelings by telling you specifically what the feelings are. So then, how do you identify your child’s feelings without asking questions? It is important for parents to be sensitive to their child’s inner emotional experiences so that they can identify these emotions, feelings, and experiences for their child. You are helping your child to learn about feelings by putting words to the feelings and internal experiences that you are noticing in them.

To identify your child’s feelings and experiences without asking questions, you would use you own empathic abilities, which are skills you use when you are trying to understand what another person is feeling and experiencing. To do this, you would attune to your child emotionally by watching your child’s face and body language, observing what your child is doing, and listening to what your child is saying.

It might be helpful to ask yourself the following questions:

- “What do I notice about my child’s body language?”
- “How do I think my child is feeling right now?”
- “What feelings are being expressed through the character my child is pretending to be?”
- “What feelings are being expressed through the toys my child is playing with?”
- “What do I think my child is experiencing right now?”
- “What do I think my child likes or doesn’t like right now?”
- “What do I think my child wants or doesn’t want right now?”

Then you would put together a Feelings Identification Statement that identifies the feeling, preference, desire, or inner experience that you have noticed in your child and communicate this statement out loud to your child.

When you are first learning this skill, begin by identifying some common comfortable feelings by saying something like:

- “You look very happy.”
- “I can see you’re really excited.”
- “You’re proud of that.”
- “You really like doing that.”
- “That kitten looks very curious.”
- “That dinosaur is feeling really brave.”

Then try out some common uncomfortable feelings such as:

- “It looks like you’re frustrated.”
- “That made you really mad.”
- “You look sad.”
- “I can see you don’t like that.”
- “That dog looks frightened.”
- “That pirate seems very angry.”

## **Identify comfortable and uncomfortable feelings**

The purpose of the Feelings Identification Skill is to help your child learn about and understand all of their feelings, so try to identify both comfortable feelings AND uncomfortable feelings you notice in your child.

Most parents I worked with found it much easier to identify comfortable feelings in their children, such as happy, excited, curious, and proud, than to identify uncomfortable feelings, such as angry, sad, worried, and afraid. This is normal because we all like to focus on positive things. Also, parents often think if they accept and acknowledge these uncomfortable feelings, it will encourage these feelings in their children. This is not true! By accepting and acknowledging the more uncomfortable feelings in children or in their play, parents are helping their children learn to put a word to that feeling and to

be able to regulate themselves around that feeling. If parents can be accepting about an uncomfortable or negative feeling, children learn to do the same thing for themselves so that these feelings do not become overwhelming.

Aggressive play can also be difficult for parents to acknowledge. However, aggressive themes are normal for children in play. In a play situation, children can learn valuable lessons about being able to deal appropriately with aggressive feelings. During Child-Directed Playtime, you can make a distinction between aggressive themes, which would be indicated by the content of your child’s play being aggressive, such as dinosaurs or teams of soldiers fighting with each other or a vulnerable character being hurt by a powerful character, and aggressive or unsafe behaviors, such as throwing a hard object or hitting you hard in play.

You would put yourself into a Directive Role and use the Limit-Setting Skill for any **behaviors** that are unsafe or destructive. If, however, your child is playing in a way that is expressing aggressive **themes**, such as having a dinosaur puppet bite a kitten puppet, you would stay in a Nondirective Role and use the Describing and Feelings Identification Skills by saying something like, “That dinosaur is biting the kitten. Looks like the kitten feels scared.”



*Here’s something you might be interested in:*

*Your child may notice and disapprove of you using the Feelings Identification Skill at first. This is very normal, and you can respond to your child by saying something like, “You’re noticing I’m talking differently, but I’m just making sure I understand how you are feeling.”*



## What Happens After You Make a Feelings Identification Statement?

After you make your Feelings Identification Statement, notice how your child responds to determine what you do next.

### Your child does not respond

Your child may not acknowledge you or respond at all to your Feelings Identification Statement, and that is okay. If your child does not respond to your statement, you do not need to say or do anything more about that

feeling. Often, children will not say anything after you make a Feelings Identification Statement, but will keep on playing. If this happens, you can be pretty sure you have identified the correct feeling for your child, and that is all that you need to do! You have communicated acceptance of that feeling to your child, which is very beneficial. Feel satisfied also that you are helping your child develop a vocabulary for their feelings by putting a word to the feeling you saw coming up in your child or in your child's play.

### **Your child agrees with you**

If your child agrees with your Feelings Identification Statement by responding with a simple “Yes,” then pat yourself on the back because you have used your own empathy to respond appropriately to your child and understand how your child is feeling or how your child is making the toys feel. Again, there is no need to say or do anything more about that feeling after your child has confirmed you got the correct feeling.

### **Your child agrees with you and provides details**

If your child agrees with your statement and gives more details, that's also very good! This means your child is feeling comfortable expressing more about their feelings with you. To encourage more conversation with your child, use the Paraphrasing Skill to paraphrase back to your child their response to your Feelings Identification Statement. Here's how it would look:

#### **Example #1: The lost pencil**

- The child is looking sad and the parent uses the Feelings Identification Skill and says, “It looks like you're feeling sad.”
- The child responds, “Yes, I'm sad because I lost my pencil.”
- The parent uses the Paraphrasing Skill and paraphrases back what the child said: “Oh, I see, you're telling me you are sad because your pencil is missing.”
- The child says, “Yeah, that was my special pencil.”

### **Example #2: The frightened puppy**

- The parent notices the child is making the toy puppy seem frightened and says, using the Feelings Identification Skill, “That puppy looks frightened.”
- The child responds, “Yes, the little puppy is really scared.”
- The parent uses Paraphrasing Skill and paraphrases back what the child said: “Yes, I can see how scared that puppy is.”
- The child says, “He wants to run away from the bad dinosaur.”

### **Your child disagrees with you**

If your child disagrees with your Feelings Identification Statement by just saying a simple “No,” or “No, I’m not sad,” or “No, the puppy is not scared,” then you would respond back to your child by identifying a different feeling using the Feelings Identification Skill. Here’s how it would look:

#### **Example #1: Bored, not sad**

- The child is looking sad and the parent uses the Feelings Identification Skill and says, “It looks like you’re feeling sad.”
- The child responds, “No.”
- The parent chooses a different feeling using the Feelings Identification Skill and says, “Oh, I got it wrong. You are not feeling sad, but maybe you are feeling bored.”

#### **Example #2: Lonely, not scared**

- The parent notices the child is making the toy puppy seem frightened and says, using the Feelings Identification Skill, “That puppy looks frightened.”
- The child responds, “No, the puppy is not scared.”
- The parent chooses a different feeling and using the Feelings Identification Skill says, “Okay, the puppy is not feeling scared, maybe he is feeling lonely.”

If your child keeps disagreeing with you, you would stop trying to seek confirmation from your child and you would either discontinue with Feelings Identification Statements, or you could say something like:

- “Sounds like you are feeling confused; you’re not sure how to say how you are/the puppy is feeling right now.”

Please Remember! In Child-Directed Playtime you would NOT ask your child to identify the feeling by asking a question to your child (“How are you feeling?”). Questions put pressure on children to come up with an answer that may cause a break in the relationship, which is something to be avoided during Child-Directed Playtime. At other times, outside of Child-Directed Playtime, parents may certainly ask their children how they are feeling and may even provide some ideas or suggestions on how they might be feeling in order to support learning.

## Your child corrects you

If your child corrects you and actually says how they are feeling, again, that is very good because your child is feeling comfortable enough to clarify their feelings with you and provide you with the correct feeling. Here’s how it would look:

### **Example: “No, I’m mad!”**

- The child is looking sad and the parent uses the Feelings Identification Skill and says, “It looks like you are feeling sad.”
- The child says, “No, I’m not feeling sad. I’m feeling mad.”
- Then the parent would respond by saying something like, “Okay, I got it wrong, you are not feeling sad, you are feeling mad. Thanks for letting me know.”

## Learn More About Feelings

We all have feelings, and our feelings provide us with important information if we can notice or pay attention to them. When I was working with parents as a family therapist, I noticed that many parents did not have a good emotional vocabulary themselves. Usually, parents would know the basic primary

feelings that came up in their children, such as happy, sad, angry, and scared, but were stuck when they tried to identify and describe other feelings.

This is common for adults. Many of us are unaware of the wide variety of more complex feelings that come up for both adults and children on a regular basis. There are many, many feeling words that describe our more complex feelings and emotional experiences, and it is important to become familiar with feelings other than just the very basic ones for optimal emotional health.

During my training to become a counsellor, I learned how important it was for us to be aware of these different feelings and to be able to identify them in ourselves and in others. That's why I recommend for all parents to ensure that they have a good emotional vocabulary themselves so that they are able to help their children develop their emotional vocabularies.

## **Facts about feelings**

- Feelings can be comfortable or uncomfortable. Uncomfortable feelings can be difficult when they are intense. However, they are not “bad.” Rather, they are informative and give us information that we can use to make them less uncomfortable.
- Feelings can be loosely grouped into categories (more on this below).
- We can feel one or several feelings at the same time.
- Feelings have different intensities.
- All feelings are okay to have and to notice.
- Feelings are not the same as behaviors or actions; all feelings are okay, but not all behaviors that accompany some feelings are okay. It is okay to feel angry, but it is not okay to hit someone in anger.
- Feelings are also not the same as thoughts. Thoughts are what we think about inside of our head.
- How we think or behave can affect our feelings.
- Our feelings can affect how we think and behave.
- Feelings can change.
- We can communicate verbally to express and share our feelings with others.

- Sometimes we want to keep our feelings private.
- Different people can feel differently about the same thing.
- The words “feelings” and “emotions” are often used interchangeably, however, to be precise, emotions originate as sensations in our bodies, and feelings are influenced by our emotions but are generated from our thoughts.

## **Categories of feelings**

When I was learning about feelings in my clinical counselling training program, I found the best way to learn was to categorize the different feelings instead of just lumping all feelings into a hodgepodge of feeling words. First of all, I categorized them as either comfortable or uncomfortable, and then into other somewhat related groups. I also found, after many years of working with children, that there were a number of feelings, both basic and complex, that were important for children to become familiar with as a foundation for developing a good feelings or emotional vocabulary. I have compiled a list of these feelings that come up for children in play and in real-life situations, and I encourage you to become familiar with them.



## Comfortable Feelings

**Happy**, Cheerful, Glad, Pleased

**Playful**, Silly, Goofy

**Satisfied**, Content

**Safe**, Secure

**Grateful**, Thankful, Relieved

**Relaxed**, Calm, Peaceful

**Curious**, Inquisitive, Interested

**Excited**, Energetic, Enthusiastic

**Confident**, Capable, Sure, Proud

**Hopeful**, Optimistic, Encouraged

**Powerful**, Strong, Determined

**Brave**, Courageous

**Loving**, Kind, Affectionate, Caring

**Helpful**, Generous

**Valued**, Loved, Appreciated

**Understood**, Accepted

## Uncomfortable Feelings

**Sad**, Tearful, Gloomy

**Disappointed**, Let Down

**Powerless**, Helpless, Vulnerable, Weak

**Hopeless**, Discouraged, Defeated

**Bored**, Uninterested, Restless

**Overwhelmed**, Numb, Empty

**Afraid**, Unsafe, Fearful,

Frightened, Scared

**Worried**, Anxious, Tense, Nervous

**Surprised**, Shocked, Startled, Astonished

**Confused**, Mixed-Up, Puzzled, Bewildered

**Shy**, Timid, Unsure, Hesitant

**Angry**, Mad, Grumpy, Furious

**Frustrated**, Irritated, Annoyed, Impatient

**Jealous**, Envious, Resentful

**Disgusted**, Disdainful,

Scornful, Disapproving

**Guilty**, Ashamed,

Embarrassed, Incompetent

**Hurt**, Betrayed, Humiliated, Teased

**Lonely**, Left-Out, Ignored, Rejected

## Why Use the Feelings Identification Skill?

The Feelings Identification Skill is such an important skill. I see it as the foundation of a strong and connected relationship with your child. You are learning this skill now, when your child is young, but this skill can be used as your child grows, and it is an important skill for parents to remember when their children are in adolescence. Even in adulthood, this skill is important, as it is the basis for the empathic understanding of others.

There are many reasons that parents would want to use the Feelings Identification Skill. With this skill, you are helping your child to build a feelings/emotional vocabulary. Children, like adults, experience many different

feelings. However, they still need to learn how to label these feelings with words. With the Feelings Identification Skill, you are noticing the feeling being expressed by your child and labelling this feeling with a specific word that your child will learn to associate with that feeling.

Having a good emotional vocabulary is essential for children to be able to use their words to express their feelings to others and be understood. Also, by expressing their feelings to others, the intensity of these sometimes big and uncomfortable feelings can decrease and become more manageable for children.

The Feelings Identification Skill will send a message of acceptance to children around the expression of their feelings. This is extremely important for children, as it allows them to be able to openly express their feelings to others. This skill will allow you to notice, acknowledge, and accept your child's feelings rather than minimize, discount, disapprove of, or ignore them. An important distinction for you to remember is that you can accept all your child's feelings and still limit and restrict inappropriate behaviors.

In using the Feelings Identification Skill, you are role-modelling empathy for your child. For children to be able to develop their own empathy skills, they must first experience others using empathy towards them. By using the Feelings Identification Skill, you will become more sensitive to your child's feelings and your child will feel more understood. Being able to identify children's feelings without having to ask them a question is an extremely important skill for parents because children gets the sense that parents are sensitive, attuned, and able to understand them.

This skill takes some getting used to and at first many parents report that it feels awkward and unnatural. I highly recommend that you keep practicing this skill. I know from experience that it will get easier and more natural for you and will eventually become one of the fundamental ways you communicate with your child, even into adulthood.

## **Getting Started Activity #2: Practice Using the Feelings Identification Skill**

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Nondirective Role by using the Feelings Identification Skill and keeping in mind the Independence Skill. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 ahead of time.

**Instructions:** Watch your child throughout the day, and when you notice a particular feeling coming up in your child, identify that feeling by using the Feelings Identification Skill to make a Feelings Identification Statement.

Also, keep in mind the Independence Skill and refrain from asking your child any questions about how they are feeling. Even though your child may not directly identify out loud a specific feeling, it is up to you to attune to your child and use your empathy skills to determine what your child is feeling instead of asking how they are feeling.

Additionally, don't make any judgements on the feelings that are coming up. You are responding in an objective and non-judgemental manner to what you are noticing.

Notice how your child responds to your Feelings Identification Statement. As stated above, there are several possible responses:

- Your child may not respond at all. That is fine. You have done your best to identify the feeling that came up and chances are good that if your child just keeps on playing, the feeling you identified was correct. No need to do anything else.
- Your child may agree with your Feelings Identification Statement. That's great since you got it right and your child has confirmed this. Again, no need to do anything else.
- Your child may disagree with your Feelings Identification Statement. That's great also, because your child is feeling comfortable enough to let you know exactly how they are feeling. You can acknowledge that you got the feeling wrong and thank your child for correcting you.

Keep track of the feelings you have identified for your child for several days. Make sure you are identifying comfortable and uncomfortable feelings. Make a note of how your child responds to your Feelings Identification Statements: no response, agreement, or disagreement. Reflect on this activity and how you felt doing it. Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form below to help you use this skill.

### **Parent Self-Monitoring: The Feelings Identification Skill**

During playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

I watch my child's face and body language, think to myself, and identify the feeling that my child is expressing, either directly or through the toys, and make a Feelings Identification Statement that objectively identifies that specific feeling. ("Looks like you are feeling excited." "That dinosaur looks angry.")

0

10

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As well as feelings, I identify my child's desires, preferences, and other internal experiences, and make a statement similar to a Feelings Identification Statement. ("You don't like it when the marbles get stuck." "You wish that pirate had a sword." "That was easy for you.")

0

10

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I am familiar with a variety of feelings that could come up for myself and for my child.

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With this skill, I avoid asking questions to my child about feelings such as, "Are you feeling sad?" "How are you feeling?" "How is the baby feeling?" "Why doesn't the baby want to eat?"

0

10

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To identify feelings and experiences without asking questions, I use my own empathy skills by attuning to my child emotionally and observing, listening to my child, or asking myself questions about what I think my child is feeling and experiencing.

0

10

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I identify both comfortable AND uncomfortable feelings and experiences I am noticing in my child.

0

10

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If my child expresses uncomfortable/negative feelings or aggressive play themes that include feelings such as anger, frustration, fear, sadness, etc., I will acknowledge these uncomfortable feelings using the Feelings Identification Skill; however, if my child is exhibiting unsafe or destructive behaviors, I will stop these behaviors using the Limit-Setting Skill.

0

10

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If my child confirms my Feelings Identification Statement, or does not respond to or acknowledge my Feelings Identification Statement, I do not need to follow up with my child further about this feeling and will continue on with the playtime.

0

10

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If my child responds to my Feelings Identification Statement by giving more details about this feeling, I can use the Paraphrasing Skill to encourage more conversation.

0

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If my child disagrees with my Feelings Identification Statement, I can try another feeling, (“You are not feeling sad, but maybe you are feeling bored.” “Okay, the puppy is not sad, maybe he is lonely.”), or I can acknowledge that my child is feeling confused (“You are just feeling confused right now; you don’t know how to say how you are feeling/the puppy is feeling.”). I am NOT asking how my child is feeling or how the toy is feeling.

0

10

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If my child corrects my Feelings Identification Statement by saying something like, “No, I’m not feeling sad, I’m feeling bored,” you say something like, “Oh I got it wrong. You are really feeling bored, not sad. Thanks for letting me know how you feel.”

## **Empathic Skill #3: The Paraphrasing Skill**

### **How Do You Use This Skill?**

If your child is telling you about something that is going on in the playtime or about something that has happened outside of the playtime, **respond to your child with neutral and reflective statements** by paraphrasing what your child has said to you.

Paraphrasing is basically capturing the content and meaning of what your child says by saying it out loud using slightly different words than your child used. In other words, you are reflecting the content of what your child said without changing the meaning or making judgements or offering opinions.

Paraphrasing is different than parroting. Parroting is saying something back that copies almost word-for-word exactly what your child says.

### **Examples of Using the Paraphrasing Skill**

Here are some examples of what you can say using the Paraphrasing Skill when your child is talking about what is going on **in the playtime**:

- Your child is playing with a baby doll and says to you, “I am going to put her sweater on now because she’s outside and she’s cold.” You would paraphrase this back to your child by saying something like, “Oh I see, you’ve decided to dress her in a sweater now because it’s cold outside.” (Parroting would be, “You are going to put her sweater on now because she’s outside and she’s cold.”)
- Your child is looking at the dollhouse and says to you, “This house needs furniture. I’m going to put furniture in.” You would paraphrase this by saying something like, “You’ve decided to add furniture to

that empty house.” (Parroting would be, “This house needs furniture. You’re going to put furniture in.”)

- Your child is playing with pirate toys and has one team fighting against another team. Your child is telling you about what is going on by saying, “Now the red pirates are hiding in the castle. This guy is hiding in here. The green pirates are looking for them! They can’t find them!” You could paraphrase this by saying something like, “Okay, so the red pirates have found hiding places in the castle, and the green pirates are looking for them but are really having trouble finding them!”

Here are some examples of what you can say using the Paraphrasing Skill when your child is talking about something that has happened **outside of the playtime** and may not even be related to the play activity that is going on:

- Your child is busy putting some Lego together and says to you, “Today at school Jamie got sent to the office because he hit Carl. The teacher got really mad.” You could paraphrase this back and say something like, “Oh, today your teacher got really upset and Jamie got in trouble for hitting.” (Parroting would be, “Oh, today at school Jamie got sent to the office because he hit Carl. The teacher got really mad.”)
- Your child is drawing a picture and says to you, “I don’t like it when Marcia borrows my pencil because she never gives it back.” You would paraphrase this by saying something like, “Oh, Marcia doesn’t give your pencil back when she borrows it, and you really don’t like that because then you never get it back!” (Parroting would be “You don’t like it when Marcia borrows your pencil because she never gives it back.”)
- Your child is lining up his cars and says, “I hate John (his brother)!” You could paraphrase this back and say something like, “Sounds like you’re mad at John.”

## Use the Paraphrasing Skill to encourage imagination

Here is an example of using the Paraphrasing Skill to encourage your child’s imagination. As you continue to paraphrase what your child is telling you, your child’s imagination is allowed to run free and you are giving your child a

chance to tell you more about the story that they are developing. Here's what this might look like:

- Your child is looking at the dollhouse and says to you, “This house needs furniture. I’m going to put furniture in.”
- You would paraphrase this by saying something like, “You’ve decided to add furniture to this empty house.”
- Your child then may start telling you more: “Yes, this is going to be a house for lots of kids. I am putting three kids in each bedroom.”
- You could then paraphrase with something like, “I see, three kids per bedroom.”
- Your child then may tell you more as their imagination starts to grow: “Yeah, and all the kids get a toy in their room. See, this boy has a car and the baby has a teddy bear.”
- You could then paraphrase with something like, “Oh, I see, the boy gets a toy car and the baby gets the teddy bear to play with.”
- Your child may be feeling more and more comfortable as their imagination is allowed to grow further and may say something like, “The mommy and daddy are in the kitchen making breakfast and then they are all going camping.”
- You then could paraphrase with something like, “After breakfast, everyone gets to go camping.”

You get the idea! You can keep on paraphrasing because the Paraphrasing Skill gives children the opportunity to use their imaginations to develop a story and to communicate it to others.

## **Use the Paraphrasing Skill to extend the conversation**

Here is an example of using the Paraphrasing Skill to extend a conversation with your child. This is what it might look like if you keep paraphrasing what your child is telling you about something that has happened outside of playtime:

- Child (putting Lego together): “Bruno’s mean. I hate him!”



- Parent paraphrases: “You really don’t like Bruno because he is mean to you.”
- Child: “Yeah, yesterday he pushed me into a puddle.”
- Parent paraphrases: “Oh I see, yesterday he made you get wet by pushing you into a puddle.”
- Child: “Well, I didn’t really get wet, but he made me drop the ball.”
- Parent paraphrases: “Okay, so you didn’t really get wet when he pushed you in the puddle, but you didn’t like it because he made you drop the ball.”
- Child: “Yeah, and then Laura took the ball and ran away with it. But then I chased her and she threw it back at me so I caught it and then we played together. I like Laura.”
- Parent paraphrases: “So Laura took the ball, threw it back to you, and then you and Laura started to play and had some fun together.”

As you can see, by using the Paraphrasing Skill you will support your child in developing communication skills. It is important for children to be able to express themselves to others using their words, and it is a crucial skill for children in developing their self-regulation abilities.



*Here’s something you might be interested in:*

*With the Paraphrasing Skill you would NOT respond to what your child is telling you by asking questions for further details, but rather you would keep on paraphrasing. Questions tend to shut down the conversation and can be subtly directive; however, paraphrasing increases the likelihood your child will continue talking to you and telling you more details without you having to probe for them with questions. Please see the Independence Skill for more on refraining from asking questions.*



## Why Use the Paraphrasing Skill?

Similar to the Describing and Feelings Identification Skills, the reason for paraphrasing back to your child what they are telling you is because you are striving to let your child know that you are paying attention and that you are interested in and understand what they are saying. The message your child receives from you is “I am listening to you. I am interested in what you are telling me. I understand you.”

With the Paraphrasing Skill, you show acceptance of what your child is telling you by reflecting back the content of your child’s verbalizations without making any judgements or offering any opinions on what your child is saying. By doing this, you are providing a safe and accepting environment for your child to interact verbally with you, which will allow your child freedom to communicate feelings, experiences, and thoughts to you. In other words, you are encouraging conversation between you and your child.

The Paraphrasing Skill is another one of my favourite skills because I feel that I can really connect with a child using this skill. Basically, this is a listening skill where you are listening to what your child is saying and then repeating the meaning and content out loud so your child knows you are paying attention, understand them, and are accepting of what they have said.

## Getting Started Activity #3: Practice Using the Paraphrasing Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Nondirective Role by using the Paraphrasing Skill and keeping in mind the Independence Skill. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 ahead of time.

**Instructions:** Throughout the day, be attentive to your child and notice when your child tells you something. It could be about something happening in a play situation or something that has happened in real life. After your child has finished talking, respond by using the Paraphrasing Skill and paraphrase back to your child what they have just told you. You are not changing the meaning of what your child told you, you are just repeating it using different words.

Also, keep in mind the Independence Skill. Refrain from asking any questions to your child about what they told you. Don’t suggest anything, approve or disapprove of anything, or correct anything your child tells you.

You are responding in an objective and non-judgemental manner to what your child is telling you.

Notice how your child responds to your paraphrasing. Does your child continue to tell you more? If so, keep paraphrasing and see how long you can keep the conversation going just by paraphrasing back to your child what they have told you.

Keep track of these interactions where your child is telling you something and you are paraphrasing back over several days. Are you having one or two back and forth interactions between you and your child? Are the back and forth interactions getting longer? Reflect on this activity and how you felt doing it. Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form below to help you use this skill.

### **Parent Self-Monitoring: The Paraphrasing Skill**

During playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

When my child is telling me something about what is happening in the play, I respond by paraphrasing, objectively reflecting the content of what my child said without making judgements or offering opinions.

0 10

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When my child is telling me something about what has happened in their life outside of playtime, I respond by paraphrasing, objectively reflecting the content of what my child said without making judgements or offering opinions.

0 10

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I keep paraphrasing as my child tells me things to encourage my child to use their words and to encourage imagination and creativity.

0 10

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With this skill, I refrain from asking questions about what my child is telling me.

0

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## **Empathic Skill #4: The Encouragement Skill**

### **How Do You Use This Skill?**

When you notice your child is working or has worked hard on a task, encourage and empower your child by using **Encouraging Statements**, which are basically Describing Statements or Feelings Identification Statements that focus on and **acknowledge your child's feelings, strengths, or efforts** in doing something. In Child-Directed Playtime you will **avoid praising your child**.

### **Examples of Using the Encouragement Skill**

Encouraging Statements are non-judgemental Describing Statements or Feelings Identification Statements that focus on your child's feelings, efforts, and strengths.

#### **Feelings:**

- "You're proud of that!"
- "You're happy with how that turned out."
- "It looks like you are really feeling curious about how that works."
- "You are doing that just the way you want to."

#### **Efforts:**

- "I can see you're working really hard on that."
- "You are trying hard to figure that out."
- "You're determined to get that."
- "I can see you are concentrating very hard on doing that."

- “Looks like you’ve spent a lot of time thinking that through.”
- “You worked hard to get that just how you want it.”
- “It’s hard to do, but you just keep on trying.”

### **Strengths:**

- “I can see you know how to count.”
- “Sounds like you know a lot about dogs.”
- “It looks like you know how to make a car out of Lego!”
- “You were frustrated, but you stuck with it and figured it out!”
- “You know just how you want that to be.”
- “You did it!”
- “You figured it out.”
- “You’ve got a plan.”

Making Describing Statements about a child’s actions that led to something positive can be very encouraging and empowering to children. For example, you can describe what your child did after completing something they worked hard on, such as decorating a cardboard box, by saying:

- “Oh, look at the progress you made . . . I see you put lots of stickers on that side of the box. And you drew lots of colours on the lid. And you even attached a string on this end!”

### **Why avoid praise?**

In Child-Directed Playtime, you will avoid using verbal evaluative praise. Why avoid, praise you ask? Verbal praise can be considered to be directive and generally uses words that judge and evaluate. With praise, parents are making a positive evaluation about their child or of something their child has done (criticism or disapproval would be a negative evaluation of something a child has done).

Here are some examples of verbal evaluative praise that you would **AVOID** saying during Child-Directed Playtime:

- “Wow, fantastic job making that car!”

- “I love what you did!”
- “Good work!”
- “Great job!”
- “Terrific!”
- “That’s wonderful!”
- “You did a fantastic job of colouring in that picture.”
- “You’re awesome at painting!”
- “Wow, you are so good at that!”
- “What a shot! Good shooting!”

Instead of verbally praising your child, you would use the Encouragement Skill to empower and encourage your child by focusing on your child’s feelings, efforts, and strengths and acknowledging them, as illustrated above.

Verbal praise is very useful and appropriate in many parenting situations outside of Child-Directed Playtime when you are not in a Nondirective Role, especially when teaching specific skills to children. For example, verbal praise is appropriate to use in Parent-Directed Playtime when you are in a Directive Role and have a specific learning objective for your child. Remember, though, Child-Directed Playtime is not about teaching your child to do something, but rather connecting with your child by being nondirective and showing acceptance.

Verbal praise indicates parental approval and as such is generally very rewarding and reinforcing to children. This means they will be inclined to repeat the praised behavior. For that reason, praise from the parent can be considered to be directive and thus not appropriate when parents are in a Nondirective Role.



**Something to think about:**

*When I was teaching parents about playing with their children, parents would generally find that praising their child for doing something felt very familiar, and focusing on their child’s strengths, feelings, and efforts rather than a specific outcome was more challenging.*



## Why Use the Encouragement Skill?

Encouraging Statements will empower your child because these statements are more likely to be internalized by your child than verbal praise. When parents notice and acknowledge their children's strengths and efforts, their children learn to acknowledge and internalize their own positive qualities, which builds and reinforces self-esteem and self-confidence.

Verbal praise does not allow parents to understand the experiences of their children during their efforts to master a task. Encouraging Statements let children know they are valued for being themselves and not for achieving some specific outcome. Encouragement is being supportive without being directive.

## Getting Started Activity #4: Practice Using the Encouragement Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Nondirective Role by using the Encouragement Skill and at the same time keeping in mind the Independence Skill. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 ahead of time.

**Instructions:** Whenever you can throughout the day, notice when your child is working hard or has worked hard on something. Your child may even bring it to your attention (“Look at my picture, Daddy!”).

Using the Encouragement Skill, refrain from praising your child for doing something well. For example, refrain from saying, “Great job!” “Terrific!” “That’s wonderful!” “You did a fantastic job,” or “You’re awesome!”

Instead, make Encouraging Statements that focus on your child’s feelings, efforts, and strengths. For example:

- “I can see lots of trucks on the paper.”
- “It looks like you know how to draw a truck!”
- “You drew that just the way you wanted.”
- “You’re very happy with the way that picture turned out!”
- “I can see you worked really hard on that picture.”
- “You’re trying hard to figure that out.”
- “You’re determined to get that.”

Keep in mind the Independence Skill and remember to refrain from suggesting ideas, approving or disapproving of anything, or asking any questions! Keep track over several days of the times you used the Encouragement Skill rather than verbally praising your child for doing something. Are you noticing the times you automatically praise your child? Is it becoming easier to use the Encouragement Skill? Reflect on this activity and how you felt doing it. Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form below to help you use this skill.

### Parent Self-Monitoring: The Encouragement Skill

During playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

I watch my child, and when I notice my child is working on, or has worked on a task, I say Encouraging Statements out loud to acknowledge my child's feelings, strengths, and efforts in trying to do something.

0 10

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I make Encouraging Statements that are objective and non-judgemental.

0 10

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With this skill, I refrain from using verbal evaluative praise, which focuses on reinforcement of a specific desired behavior or outcome.

0 10

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### Chapter Summary

In this chapter we examined in detail the four Empathic Skills. These four important skills are:

- The Describing Skill—describe your child's behaviors
- The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child's feelings



- The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
- The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child’s strengths and efforts

The objective of using the Empathic Skills is to notice and objectively acknowledge your child’s actions, feelings, words, and strengths so that your child feels understood and accepted. With these skills, you are attuning to and connecting with your child, which is the foundation for a strong and healthy parent-child relationship.

I want to reinforce how important these four skills are, not only for play-time, but for real life as well. As I mentioned earlier, I continue to use all of these skills on a regular basis when I am interacting not only with children, but also adults.

# Chapter 4:

## The Autonomy Skills

In this chapter, I will highlight the Autonomy Skills, which, when used with the Empathic Skills, will support parents in getting into a Nondirective Role for Child-Directed Playtime. These skills are:

- The Independence Skill—allow your child to make choices and decisions
- The Following Directions Skill—follow your child’s directions

The objective of using the Autonomy Skills is to **allow your child to take control and to lead and direct the play activity**. These skills provide your child with a sense of autonomy and are very important for the development of your child’s self-identity.

With the Autonomy Skills, children are given the opportunity to experience a sense of control. Since most of the time a child’s life is highly controlled and structured, it is important for children to be able to have the opportunity, at times, to experience some control themselves. If children are never able to experience this, they may either act out in inappropriate ways to try to gain control, or they may just give up, believing it is hopeless for them to even try. For any child, but especially one who is hesitant or unsure, having this opportunity to have their choices respected and accepted by their parent will help build both self-esteem and self-confidence.

# Autonomy Skill #1: The Independence Skill

## How Do You Use This Skill?

When using the Independence Skill, you will **refrain from**:

- Telling or suggesting to your child what to do or not do
- Advising, coaching, teaching, or correcting your child
- Making judgements or expressing approval or disapproval
- Directing your child in any manner

The objective of using the Independence Skill is to **give your child opportunities to take responsibility for making choices and decisions without being directed by you**. With this skill, you are giving your child the freedom to explore and to decide on their own what to do and how to do it.

### Give no directions!

Here are some examples of things you would **AVOID** saying to your child during Child-Directed Playtime:

- “Let’s play with this today.”
- “You can’t put that big piece in there; it won’t fit. Use the smaller one.”
- “Use this piece.”
- “Do it like this.”
- “Why don’t you draw me a picture of our house?”
- “Give me that piece and I’ll show you how to do it.”
- “Don’t get so angry.”
- “Stop crying!”
- “Don’t scribble on your paper.”
- “Why are you doing it like that? That’s the hard way of doing it. Try doing it like this.”
- “No, that’s not the right way to do it. Do it like I showed you.”
- “Say please when you ask for something.”

- “The instructions say you have to put this piece together first. Do it like that.”

## What can I do instead?

Instead of making suggestions, giving ideas, or telling your child what to do, you can use the **Empathic Skills** to acknowledge your child’s experiences in the playtime, stay in a Nondirective Role, and provide an environment of acceptance to your child.

Remember, the Empathetic Skills are the following:

- The Describing Skill—describe your child’s behaviors
- The Feelings Identification Skill—identify your child’s feelings
- The Paraphrasing Skill—paraphrase what your child is telling you
- The Encouragement Skill—acknowledge your child’s strengths and efforts



*This is an important point to keep in mind, however:*

*If your child is about to engage, or is engaging, in unsafe or destructive behavior, you would not stay in a Nondirective Role using the Independence Skill. You would instead switch to a Directive Role and use the Limit-Setting Skill to stop the behavior.*



## Examples of Using the Independence Skill

Here are some examples of what you could say using the Empathic Skills to acknowledge your child’s experiences **instead of telling your child what to do**:

- Using the Describing Skill: “You’re trying to decide what to play with today” instead of “Let’s play with this today.”
- Using the Describing Skill: “You’re trying to put that big piece in there, but it won’t fit” instead of “You can’t put that big piece in there; it won’t fit. Use the smaller one.”

- Using the Describing Skill: “You’ve decided to use that piece” instead of “Use this piece.”
- Using the Encouragement Skill: “You have a plan; you know just how you want to do this” instead of “Do it like this.”
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “You’re feeling unsure about what to draw today” instead of “Why don’t you draw me a picture of our house?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “You are thinking really hard about how that works” instead of “Give me that piece and I’ll show you how to do it.”
- Using the Paraphrasing Skill: “You are telling me that you feel angry right now” instead of “Don’t get so angry.”
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “Looks like you are really feeling sad; I can see tears coming out of your eyes” instead of “Stop crying!”
- Using the Describing Skill: “You’ve decided to scribble on your paper today” instead of “Don’t scribble on your paper.”
- Using the Encouragement Skill: “Wow, that looks hard to do, but you are determined to do it” instead of “Why are you doing it like that? That’s the hard way of doing it. Try doing it like this.”
- Using the Describing Skill: “You are choosing to do it like that” instead of “No, that’s not the right way to do it. Do it like I showed you.”
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “You want me to give you that piece” instead of “Say please when you ask for something.”
- Using the Paraphrasing Skill: “You’re saying you want to put it together your way” instead of “The instructions say you have to put this piece together first. Do it like that.”

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*Here's something good to know:*

*If it is safe to do so, you can allow natural consequences to happen when using the Independence Skill. Children learn about the impact of their actions on the real world from natural consequences. A natural consequence is anything that happens naturally, with no parent interference. For example, you can let your child build a structure with Lego their way, without making any judgements or suggestions, knowing that it is very fragile and may likely topple over.*

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## Tips for Using the Independence Skill

Here are some general tips for using the Independence Skill:

- Ask no questions
- Allow your child time to make decisions
- Encourage your child to lead the play
- Be less demanding
- Allow difficult play themes
- “Jump in” to a Directive Role temporarily

### Ask No Questions

During Child-Directed Playtime, you will refrain from asking your child questions. Here are some examples of things you would AVOID saying:

- “How are you feeling?”
- “Are you feeling sad?”
- “Why are you feeling so angry?”
- “Are you having fun?”
- “What’s that?”
- “What are you doing?”
- “What’s that supposed to be?”

- “Why are you doing it that way?”
- “What is the princess saying?”
- “Why is the dinosaur going in there?”
- “Where is the car going?”
- “Does the puppy feel sad?”
- “What does the dolly say?”
- “What does that word say?”
- “What colour is that?”
- “How many purple ones are there?”

Parents are largely encouraged to ask questions to their children because questions can support their children’s learning. Asking questions also allows parents to understand their children better. Questions can be very appropriate to ask your child outside of Child-Directed Playtime. For example, questions are a good way to get your child to use their thinking skills when you are teaching them about something.



*Please see Chapter 8 for a discussion on how to use questions effectively during Parent-Directed Playtime.*



Parents are rarely told to limit the number of questions they ask to their children. So why do we do it here? In Child-Directed Playtime, parents are told to refrain from asking questions to their children because parents are putting themselves into a Nondirective Role, meaning they are providing an environment where their children are free to make choices and decisions that will be accepted by the parent (barring any unsafe or destructive behaviors). Asking questions can put parents into a Directive Role where children feel compelled to answer a certain way in order to please their parents. Thus, asking questions is not appropriate for Child-Directed Playtime.

Essentially, when parents ask their child a question, they are expecting a response from their child. In other words, they are directing and guiding their child to think of and provide some kind of a verbal response. For children,

verbal skills are developing and it requires a lot of energy from their brains and bodies to first think of a response and then put this response into words. If the question you ask is too challenging for your child to answer, it will tend to discourage verbal expression by your child.

The key point here, however, is that children will think about how their response to a parent's question will be received by their parent. Children may worry about saying the "correct" thing and whether their parent will respond in an accepting manner or will be critical or judgemental of what they say. This can increase anxiety levels for children and may discourage your child's free expression of thoughts and feelings to you. The advantage of limiting your questions is that your child will feel more freedom to verbally interact with you without being subtly directed by you asking questions. Additionally, when parents ask questions one after another, children may feel interrogated and uncomfortable. They may feel there is little chance to come up with their own ideas and may get into the habit of not responding at all to their parents' questions.

In Child-Directed Playtime, instead of asking questions to your child, use the following Empathic Skills to make a statement to acknowledge your child's experiences in the playtime:

- The Describing Skill to make a Describing Statement
- The Feelings Identification Skill to make a Feelings Identification Statement
- The Paraphrasing Skill to make a statement paraphrasing what your child told you
- The Encouragement Skill to make an Encouraging Statement

Here are some examples of what you could say by using the Empathic Skills instead of asking your child a question:

- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: "I can see you're feeling frustrated" instead of "How are you feeling?"
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: "Looks like you are feeling sad" instead of "Are you feeling sad?"
- Using the Paraphrasing Skill: "You're telling me how angry you're feeling right now" instead of "Why are you feeling so angry?"



- Using the Describing Skill: “Looks like you are having fun” instead of “Are you having fun?”
- Using the Encouragement Skill: “It looks like you are really working hard on that” instead of “What’s that?”
- Using the Encouragement Skill: “You are doing it just the way you want” instead of “What are you doing?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “I can see two tall towers and a fence around them” instead of “What’s that supposed to be?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Looks like you’ve decided to do it that way” instead of “Why are you doing it that way?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “That princess is talking to the other princess” instead of “What is the princess saying?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Looks like the dinosaur is going in there” instead of “Why is the dinosaur going in there?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “I see that the car is going over there” instead of “Where is the car going?”
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “The puppy looks sad” instead of “Does the puppy feel sad?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “The dolly is talking to her mommy” instead of “What does the dolly say?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Looks like you are trying to figure out what the word says” instead of “What does that word say?”
- Using the Describing Skill: “You chose the purple one” instead of “What colour is that?”
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “You wanted to add three purple ones” instead of “How many purple ones are there?”



**Something else to think about:**

*I found over the years teaching parents child-directed play skills that avoiding asking questions to their children during playtime was very difficult for most parents. Generally, parents feel the*

*need to ask their children questions in order to help their children think and learn. And it is true, asking specific questions to your child does help them think and learn. Remember, though, in Child-Directed Playtime, the goal is not to teach your child something but to attune to your child so you are able to understand your child and acknowledge their experiences in the playtime. It is this attuned understanding of the child by the parent that is so important for a connected and strong parent-child relationship.*

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## **Give your child time to make a decision**

With the Independence Skill, remember to allow some time for your child to think about things and make a choice or decision without stepping into a Directive Role by giving suggestions or advice, answering questions, or taking over, even if it seems very tempting! Waiting patiently for your child to choose something or figure something out can be very difficult for many parents. However, just being with your child and acknowledging their experiences will go a long way to support your child's healthy emotional development.

As a play therapist, I was always happily surprised at how much children appreciated this time to figure things out for themselves. Even though it was tempting to suggest something to a child, I would take some deep breaths to keep myself calm and grounded, keep my attention focused on the child, and quietly use the Empathic Skills to acknowledge the child's feelings. I would also remind myself that sometimes children need a few minutes just to think about things or decide on what to do and it is okay to just wait and respect a child's need for time to choose.

## **Encourage your child to lead the play**

With the Independence Skill, parents can direct their children to take responsibility for making decisions and choices. Basically, parents are granting autonomy to their children by encouraging them to take on a Directive Role! Yes, parents are being directive here, but they are doing this by stressing that their children should take control. In reality, parents are letting their children know that it is okay for them to freely make their own choices.

You can encourage your child to make choices and decisions by saying something like:

- “You can decide how you want to use it.”
- “You can choose how to play with that.”
- “You can decide what it is.”
- “You can choose what to do.”
- “You can choose whatever you want to draw.”
- “You can make up your own rules today.”

## **Be less demanding**

During Child-Directed Playtime, you do not need to focus on correcting your child’s minor inappropriate behaviors such as being polite, taking turns, speaking grammatically, or acting age-appropriately. “What!” you say. “This seems counterintuitive!” But, so long as your child’s behavior is safe and non-destructive, you may choose to ignore some of these minor inappropriate behaviors during Child-Directed Playtime.

Why not correct minor misbehaviors during Child-Directed Playtime? Outside of Child-Directed Playtime, you can absolutely work on teaching and correcting these behaviors. However, Child-Directed Playtime can be considered a special time between you and your child where your child can see you in a slightly different way than during normal everyday life, where it is important for parents to teach and correct children. You can remind yourself that teaching children appropriate behaviors in real life is not hampered by being less demanding during Child-Directed Playtime.

## **Allow difficult play themes**

Sometimes, parents will notice their child’s play themes may not be all happiness and light! For example, your child may:

- Take on the role of a bad guy
- Play out an aggressive theme, like a shark eating vulnerable creatures
- Have a baby doll cry loudly

Children naturally incorporate real life situations into their play, which may result in aggressive or other negative themes potentially seen as inappropriate by their parents. In Child-Directed Playtime, if your child’s play

themes show some negative or aggressive themes, this is healthy and normal and it means that your child feels safe with you. You can accept the content of the play in Child-Directed Playtime. It is only when your child's behaviors become unsafe or destructive that you would step into a Directive Role to limit these behaviors.

### **“Jump in” to a Directive Role temporarily**

During Child-Directed Playtime, it can be difficult to decide when, or even if, you should step in to assist your child by temporarily taking on a Directive Role. You don't want to let your child keep struggling with something that is too difficult or frustrating. There is a difference between being nondirective and uninvolved!

If you have remained in a Nondirective Role for a period of time and are noticing that your child is unable to make a decision or is continuing to struggle to master a task that seems too difficult or frustrating, and may even be asking for your help, you would not let your child keep on struggling, become overly anxious or frustrated, or even give up. Instead, parents can temporarily “jump in” to a Directive Role and support their children with whatever they need so that their children can continue on with the playtime activity or complete the task by themselves.

You may even ask a question to your child about how you could help. In situations like this, you can ask:

- “What would you like me to do?”
- “How would you like me to help you?”

Assisting your child in a small way to enable your child to complete a task is called “scaffolding” and is an effective way to help children learn to master and complete tasks. Just a reminder, however, that in Child-Directed Playtime, your goal is not to teach your child to master a specific task, so it is only after you have acknowledged your child's struggles and if you notice your child continuing to struggle that you would step in to offer assistance.

In Child-Directed Playtime, after you have provided just enough assistance to your child so they can carry on, you would “back off” to a Nondirective Role again.

**Let's now review what we have learned so far in this chapter.** We began by introducing the two Autonomy Skills (Independence Skill and Following Directions Skill) that will allow your child to take control and to lead and direct the play activity. So far, we have focused on the Independence Skill, which asks parents to refrain from directing their child in any manner. Instead, parents are asked to use the four Empathic Skills to interact with their children. We also identified some important tips for using the Independence Skill:

- Ask no questions
- Allow time to make decisions
- Encourage your child to lead the play
- Be less demanding
- Allow difficult play themes
- “Jump in” to a Directive Role temporarily

## **More Examples of Using the Independence Skill**

We will now have a look at more examples of using the Independence Skill in some common situations. The Independence Skill can be especially useful when your child:

- Is struggling with a task
- Cannot choose what to play or do
- Asks you a question
- Wants you to make a choice or decision

### **When your child is struggling with a task**

Being in a Nondirective Role can be tricky if you notice your child is struggling with something or trying to figure out something. Often, your first instinct is to step in to take on a Directive Role and give your child advice or suggestions, to take over and help your child complete the task, or possibly even to complete the task entirely yourself! For me that was very true! When

I was learning child-directed play skills, it was very difficult at first to resist “jumping in” right away to help a struggling child.

Instead of immediately taking on a Directive Role when you notice your child is trying to figure something out, stay in a Nondirective Role and use the Independence Skill to allow your child opportunities to problem solve and to make their own choices and decisions.

### **Example #1: Hat too small!**

You notice your child is struggling to put a hat on a doll. Your first instinct may be to step in and say something like, “Here, let me show you how to do it.” In Child-Directed Playtime, however, you are in a Nondirective Role. Using the Independence Skill, you would refrain from showing your child what to do, at least initially. Instead you would use the Empathic Skills to acknowledge your child’s experience of trying to put the hat on the doll while giving your child a chance to figure things out. Here are some examples of what you could say:

- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “You wish that hat would go on the doll.”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Now you’re using both hands to get it to stay on.”
- Using the Encouragement Skill: “You’re working hard and you just about got it on!”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Now you’ve decided to try putting on the bigger hat that fits.”

### **Example #2: Space too small!**

Your child is trying to fit something into a space that is too small. Your first instinct may be to tell your child what to do by saying “You can’t put that big piece in there; it won’t fit. Use the smaller one.” Being in a Nondirective Role and using the Independence Skill, you would not tell your child what to do but instead use the Empathic Skills to acknowledge your child’s experience of trying to fit the block into the spot and allow your child some time to figure things out. Here are some examples of what you could say:

- Using the Describing Skill: “Oh, I can see you are trying to fit that block into that spot, but it is not going in.”
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: “That’s really frustrating!”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Now you are trying a different way to get it in.”
- Using the Describing Skill: “Now you’re choosing a smaller block to go there.”

## **When your child cannot decide what to do**

Generally, when parents take on a Nondirective Role and use the Independence Skill to encourage their children to choose what to play with, children will go right to the toys to choose something and then start to play. Some children, however, can be a bit hesitant at first when deciding what to play with. Remembering back to when I was working as a play therapist, when I invited children to choose what to play with as we started playtime, some children would start by just quietly moving around and looking at the toys for several minutes. Other children would be very hesitant and would stand in one spot, appearing very unsure as to what to do and even looking somewhat anxious.

It is normal for many children to be hesitant to choose what to do, especially if they are not used to having the opportunity to choose their play activities. As a parent, you may feel uncomfortable yourself, seeing your child so indecisive. Parents often feel the need to step in right away and suggest an activity for their child or ask their child what they want to play.

Once again, in Child-Directed Playtime, you put yourself in a Nondirective Role. Using the Independence Skill, you to refrain from directing or suggesting a toy or activity for your child. For example, you would not say something like, “Let’s play Uno,” or “Why don’t we play with your Lego today?” With the Independence Skill, you would also avoid asking your child questions such as “What do you want to do?” or “Do you want to play with the dolls?” because questions tend to be directive and put pressure on your child to provide a specific answer.

So, in Child-Directed Playtime, when you notice your child is hesitant to play and is having trouble deciding what to do, instead of directing

your child to a toy or activity, use the Empathic Skills to acknowledge your child's indecision.

Here are some examples of using the Empathic Skills instead of telling your child what to do:

- Using the Describing Skill: "You're thinking about what to choose to play with."
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: "Looks like you're feeling unsure about what to choose."
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: "You just want to look at things first before you make up your mind about what to do."
- Using the Describing Skill: "You're just checking things out."
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: "You're not sure what you want to play with."
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: "It looks like it is hard for you to choose something to play with today."

Remember, parents can also direct their children to make their own choices or decisions by saying something like:

- "You can choose what to play with today."
- "You get to decide what to do now."

Don't forget to wait a few minutes, repeating some of the above statements, without making any suggestions about what to do. This will give your child an opportunity to choose what to do without having any pressure put on them.

If your child is getting frustrated and you have given them lots of opportunities to make a choice about what to play, and you feel they just want you to make a simple choice to get the play going, you can temporarily take on a Directive Role and choose or suggest something you think your child would like. Remember to get back into a Nondirective Role when your child starts to play.

Also, be prepared for your child to disapprove of your choice and then to direct you to something different! This is very common behavior in children. Children are sometimes hesitant to make the initial choice, but then after



their parent makes a choice, it seems to give the child permission to make a decision, which is often different from what the parent decided on!

## When your child asks you a question

If your child asks you a question about a toy or activity, or about what to do, or about how to do something in Child-Directed Playtime, you do NOT immediately respond with an answer or immediately show your child how to use the toy. Sometimes children just ask a question to acknowledge they are curious about something and are not necessarily seeking an answer.

Instead of stepping in right away to answer your child's questions, use the Independence Skill and allow your child an opportunity to figure things out themselves. Respond, using the Empathic Skills, in a way that will inspire your child to problem solve or to encourage your child to make a decision or choice.

Here are some examples of how this would look:

- The child asks the parent, "How does this work?" The parent responds, "You're not sure how that works." (Feelings Identification Skill)
- The child asks, "What's this?" The parent responds, "Hmm, you're wondering what that is." (Describing Skill)
- The child asks, "What should I do?" The parent responds, "You can't decide what you want to play with today." (Describing Skill)
- The child asks, "What's this for?" The parent responds, "Hmm, you're feeling curious about that thing." (Feelings Identification Skill)
- The child asks, "How should I do this?" The parent responds, "Hmm, I see you're trying to figure out how to make that work." (Describing Skill)
- The child asks, "What should I draw?" The parent responds, "You just don't know what you want to draw right now." (Describing Skill)
- The child asks, "How do you play this game?" The parent responds, "You'd like to know how to play this game." (Feelings Identification Skill)

After you have acknowledged your child's struggle or indecision, you can then encourage your child to make their own decision or choice by saying, for example:

- "You can decide how you want to use it."
- "You can decide what it is."
- "You can choose what to do."
- "You can choose how to play with that."
- "That's something you can decide."

Remember again, allow some time for your child to decide what to do or how to do it without giving any suggestions or advice yourself, even if it seems very tempting! You can repeat some of the above statements to encourage your child to make a choice or decision about what to do.

Children would frequently ask me questions when I was playing with them in my playroom, such as "What's this?" or "What's this for?" I would generally allow children the opportunity to make a choice or decision about what a toy was or what it could be used for by saying something like, "You're really curious about that," or "You're not sure about that," or "You can decide what that is," or "You can choose how to use that." I was always amazed that the majority of times the child would stay focused on the toy and use their imagination or problem-solving skills to decide on what they wanted to use the toy for. Then, they would carry on playing without me having had to give an answer.

That being said, sometimes children can be very persistent and demanding with their questions. If you think that your child just wants a simple answer, it is okay to give your child a brief answer.

## **When your child wants you to decide**

Sometimes children will want their parents to make a decision for them. For example, your child might ask you:

- "Mommy, what do you want to do?"
- "Daddy, you choose."
- "What should we do?"
- "Do you want to play Candyland or Snakes and Ladders, Mom?"

- “Do you want to play with Lego, Daddy?”

Again, in Child-Directed Playtime, your job is to maintain a Nondirective Role. Here are some examples of how you could respond:

- “You want me to decide what to play with, but today you can decide what to play with.”
- “Today, you get to decide what to do.”
- “Looks like you are not sure what you want to play with, but you can decide what to do today.”
- “Hmm, I don’t know. I’ll let you decide today.”
- “Well, you can decide if we should play Lego or if we should play something else today.”

If your child is still very persistent with wanting you to make a choice after you have allowed them an opportunity to choose or decide, and it seems your child really just wants you to choose, you can switch temporarily to a Directive Role for this one response and make the choice.

Again, the really funny and interesting thing I have noticed over the years with my own children and grandchildren, and with my child clients, is that invariably, whatever I choose, the child then chooses something different! Of course, should this happen, you would go with the child’s choice!

## Why Use the Independence Skill?

Children are given the freedom to be creative and imaginative when their choices and decisions are accepted by their parents. Children begin to develop their thinking and problem-solving skills as well. The benefits of allowing your child to take some control in a play situation include your child beginning to develop a sense of independence. If children are always told what to do or what things are supposed to be used for, even if it is in play, they do not get the chance to develop their independence skills and they can become dependent on others for making their decisions. Children who are always told what to do and how to do it may also doubt their abilities. These children may feel less capable and less confident and will be less likely to try things themselves and freely explore their world.

When children are given the autonomy to make decisions about what they want to play with and how they want to play, and these decisions are accepted, they gain a sense of self-confidence. Children also learn to take responsibility for their actions when they are given the opportunity to make choices and decisions.

The Independence Skill can be very difficult for many parents and requires a shift in thinking. Most parents want to teach, help, and correct their children. In addition, it is generally accepted that parents do need to be in charge and make decisions for their children on a daily basis, so being nondirective and refraining from suggesting, helping, teaching, or correcting your child can seem very different at first. However, providing children with opportunities where their feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions are acknowledged and accepted, especially by their parents, is extremely important in helping a child develop a positive sense of self-identity, self-esteem, and self-confidence.

## Getting Started Activity #5: Practice Using the Independence Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Nondirective Role by using the Independence Skill in combination with the four Empathic Skills (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing and Encouragement Skills). Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 ahead of time.

**Instructions:** Whenever you can, notice when your child:

- Is focused on completing a task
- Is working hard trying to figure something out and is maybe asking for your help
- Asks you a question about a toy or activity, or about what to do or how to do something
- Seems undecided and cannot choose what to play
- Wants you to make a choice or decision

Use the Independence Skill to give your child the opportunity to take responsibility for making a choice or decision about something and accept this choice or decision as long as it is safe and non-destructive. You can also:

- Give your child time to make the choice or decision
- Directly encourage your child to take responsibility for making choices or decisions (“You can decide what to do with that”; “You can choose where to put it.”)

Resist the temptation to “jump in” immediately and tell your child what to do, make suggestions or judgements, answer questions, or teach or correct your child.

Instead, stay in a Nondirective Role and use the Empathic Skills by:

- Describing what your child is doing and making Describing Statements
- Identifying any feelings by making Feelings Identification Statements
- Paraphrasing what your child is saying
- Encouraging your child instead of praising

If your child continues to struggle and is getting overly anxious or frustrated, you can then temporarily step into a Directive Role and:

- Provide just enough help so your child can continue and complete the task
- Help your child to engage in the activity
- Provide a brief answer to satisfy your child’s curiosity
- Make a decision for your child

Immediately after, return to a Nondirective Role.

Keep track over several days of the times you used the Independence Skill, your child managed successfully on their own, and you did not need to step into a Directive Role, or perhaps you were able to delay stepping into a Directive Role. Reflect on this activity and how you felt doing it. Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form below to help you in using this skill.

### **Parent Self-Monitoring: The Independence Skill**

During Child-Directed Playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

With this skill, I give my child opportunities to take responsibility for making choices and decisions without being directed by me.

0 10

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I invite my child to make their own choices or decisions by saying something like, "You can decide what it is." "You can choose how to use it."

0 10

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I avoid telling or suggesting to my child what to do or not do, as long as the play remains safe and non-destructive.

0 10

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I avoid teaching, coaching, or correcting my child, as long as the play remains safe and non-destructive.

0 10

---

With this skill, I avoid asking questions to my child.

0 10

---

I allow time for my child to make a decision or choice without stepping into a Directive Role to give suggestions or support even though it may feel tempting for me to help my child.

0 10

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I use the Empathic Skills (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, Encouragement Skills) to attune to my child and acknowledge what they are feeling, doing, and experiencing.

0 10

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If my child continues to struggle with something, or continues to be unable to decide on something, I switch briefly into a Directive Role and “jump in” to provide just enough help to support my child in mastering the task or making a decision. Then, I immediately “back off” to a Nondirective Role.

0

10

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If my child is about to do, or is doing, something that is unsafe or destructive, I will temporarily step into a Directive Role to use the Limit-Setting Skill to stop the behavior.

0

10

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During Child-Directed Playtime, I am less demanding around behaviors such as being polite, speaking grammatically, or acting age-appropriately and may choose to ignore these minor misbehaviors during playtime.

0

10

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## **Autonomy Skill #2: The Following Directions Skill How Do You Use This Skill?**

Children will sometimes ask their parents to join with them in play in a number of different ways. They may give their parents directions to become involved more interactively in the playtime by:

- Asking their parents to do a task
- Inviting their parents to engage in imaginary play together
- Asking to play a game with rules together

The objective of the Following Directions Skill is to **follow your child's directions and play the way you think your child would want you to play** whenever your child indicates they want you to do something.

.....  
*Again, please keep this point in mind:*

*If your child is about to engage, is engaging, or is asking you to engage in unsafe or destructive behavior, you would not stay in a Nondirective Role using the Following Directions Skill, but would instead switch to a Directive Role and use the Limit-Setting Skill to stop or refuse the behavior.*

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## Tips for Using the Following Directions Skill

Here are some general tips for using the Following Directions Skill:

- Wait for an invitation to join in play
- Ask for clarification if you are unsure
- Know when to stop using this skill

### Wait for an invitation to join in play

In Child-Directed Playtime, parents would **wait** for their children to invite them to participate in a play activity. Parents would not suggest or initiate a play activity themselves. If your child does not give you any directions or invite you to join in a play activity, that is perfectly fine. There would be no need for you to use the Following Directions Skill. You would still be engaged in the playtime by using all the other Nondirective Role Skills (the Empathic Skills and Independence Skill).

### Ask for clarification

If you are really unsure what to do or your child has given you very little direction, this is one case where you could ask a brief question to your child to get clarification. Generally, in Child-Directed Playtime, asking questions to your child is not appropriate. However, this is a special case where you could ask a question in order to get clearer directions from your child. For example, you could ask:

- “How do you want me to do it?”
- “Where should I draw it?”



- “What would you like me to do?”
- “Where should I put it?”
- “How shall I do it?”

But try not to ask too many questions, and try to do whatever is being asked of you the way you think your child would like.

## **When to stop using the Following Directions Skill**

An important point to remember when using the Following Directions Skill is that you should not get too focused on YOURSELF—that is, on what you are doing, on the character you are role-playing, or on the game you are playing. Remember to stay focused on and attentive to your child. Notice if your child is staying engaged in whatever it is they have asked you to be part of, and as soon as your child loses interest in this activity and moves on to a different type of play activity, this is your cue to stop using the Following Directions Skill by terminating your own role-play as a particular character, by not continuing with a game your child has lost interest in, or by disengaging from whatever your child has asked you to do. You would continue to use the other Nondirective Role Skills (the Empathic Skills and Independence Skill) as your child decides to focus on a different activity.

In Child-Directed Playtime, although your child has initiated your involvement in the specific play activity, you would not try to keep them engaged in this activity if they have lost interest or have moved on to another type of play activity.

## **Examples of Following Directions When You Are Invited to Do a Task**

Children may want their parents to join them in doing a task or completing an activity by giving their parent directions to do something. For example:

- Your child asks you to draw a tree; you could say, “Okay, so I’m supposed to draw a tree right here.” You proceed to draw a tree.
- Your child asks you to line up the cars one behind the other; you could say, “You want me to line these cars up just like this” as you line up the cars.

- Your child asks you to put together a marble run; you could say, “Okay, I can put this marble run together.” You proceed to put together the marble run.
- Your child asks you to cut out a picture of a dog from a magazine; you could say, “Okay, you would like me to cut out this picture.” You proceed to cut out the picture.
- Your child asks you to build a tower of blocks just like she is doing; you could say, “You want me to stack these just as high as yours.” You proceed to stack the blocks just like your child.

Your child will correct you if you do the “wrong” thing! If that happens, just respond by saying you “got it wrong” and do what you are being asked to do. If you are unsure of what to do, just do what you think your child would want you to do or ask a brief question for clarification. Here’s what this would look like:

- Your child asks you to draw a tree. You say, “So I’m supposed to draw a tree right here?” as you start to draw, but your child says, “NO! Not there, put it over here!” indicating where it should go. You could say, “Okay, that is where you want the tree.” Then you proceed to draw the tree where your child indicates.
- Your child asks you to line up the cars one behind the other. You say, “You want me to line these cars up just like this” as you line up the cars. Your child then says, “No, not like that!” and gives you no indication of how they should be lined up. You could ask, “How do you want me to do it?” and then follow your child’s directions.
- Your child asks you to cut out a picture of a dog from a magazine. You say, “Okay, you would like me to cut out this picture.” You proceed to cut out the picture and your child says, “No, not that way, cut it out bigger!” You could say, “Okay, you want me to make it bigger.” Then you proceed to make a larger cut-out.

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*You might find this interesting:*

*Your child may ask you to build or make something fairly complex that requires a number of steps for you to complete over an extended period of time, such as building a complex Lego structure, assembling a castle that has many pieces, completing a specific craft activity, etc. When children ask their parents to do something time consuming, often they will either watch quietly or go away and play something else by themselves since their parents' attention is now focused on completing the task. In Child-Directed Playtime, parents do not focus their attention away from their child on other tasks, even if it is building or making something for their child, because this does not encourage interaction between parent and child. If your child asks you to make or build something specific that would take more than a few minutes and would take your attention away from them, you would say something like, "You really want me to make this Lego car for you, but right now we are playing together. Later when I have some time, I will follow the instructions and build you that Lego car. Right now, you and I can build the car together any way you want."*

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## Examples of Following Directions When You Are Invited to Engage in Imaginary Play

Your child may invite you into their imaginary play world by asking you to take on the role of another character either as yourself or through another toy. For example, your child may want you to role-play as a bad guy or a teacher, or your child may want you to play with a toy soldier or animal and role-play by giving a voice to that toy.

Now you can follow your child's directions and pretend to be this character in the way you think your child would like. Your child may correct you as you go along with the play, so just play however you are being directed by your child. It is as if your child is the director and you are the actor in your child's play. I call this **Child-Directed Imaginary Play**.

.....  
*I think this is good to know:*

*When children ask their parents to participate in imaginary play, parents and children can connect on a whole new level. You are entering your child's special world and it is important to be respectful of this imaginary world your child is creating. When you follow your child's directions and play in the way your child wants you to play, you are sending your child a message that you are interested in and accepting of their imaginative and creative ideas. This is a very powerful way to strengthen your relationship with your child.*

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## Tips for engaging in Child-Directed Imaginary Play

### **Pretending**

- Objects do not necessarily need to look realistic; for example, a block could be a car, boat, or airplane.
- You can model imaginary play behaviors by miming actions and adding sound effects. Examples include pretending to drink out of a cup, eat food off a plate, comb hair, or brush teeth.

### **Using first-person narrative**

- Your child may want you to take on the imaginary role of a character directly yourself by, for example, saying, "Daddy, you be the teacher." Remember to use a first person point of view or narrative when you speak by saying something like, "Good morning children. I would like you to please sit in a circle on the floor."
- Your child may ask you to take on the imaginary role of a character indirectly through a toy by, for example, pointing to a miniature toy dragon and saying to you, "Mommy, you be the dragon." Give a voice to the character using a first person point of view as you hold and move the object representing the character. For example, you could hold onto the dragon, move it around in the air, and give it a voice by saying, "I am going to fly over the castle!"

## **Changing your voice**

You can change your normal voice fairly easily to match a particular character by making your voice higher, lower, faster, slower, louder, or quieter. If you want, you can even add accents or silly intonation to a character's voice. Please avoid accents that could be offensive or reinforce stereotypes.

## **Puppet play**

If your child asks you to be a puppet character, put your hand into the puppet and open and close the puppet's mouth in time and synchronized with the syllables of the words you say for the puppet.

## **Exaggerate emotions**

You can exaggerate emotions in imaginary play, but remember to keep things funny or engaging and not scary.

- Pretend to cry loudly: "Whaaa, I lost my wallet!"
- Pretend to be shocked: "What's going on!"
- Pretend to be angry: "Grrr, now I'm really mad!"
- Pretend to be an incompetent, bumbling character, making mistakes on purpose: "Whoops, I didn't see that!"

You get the idea! Make sure to keep things comical.

## **Stepping out of your imaginary role**

You can step out of your imaginary role as needed by switching out of first person narrative. Although you will try to guess how your child wants you to act out a role and your child will correct you if you are wrong, you may step out of your imaginary role briefly to ask your child a question for clarification, for example by saying, "What would you like me to do?" or "What should the dinosaur do now?" Then you would step back into your imaginary role.

You may also want to briefly step out of your imaginary role at times to use the Empathic Skills. For example, you are in the role of a dragon and are holding on to the toy dragon and flying it in the air saying, "I'm looking for the princess!" If you notice your child moving the princess quickly under the pillow, you could step out of your dragon role briefly to use the Describing Skill and say, "It looks like you are putting the princess under that pillow,"

and the Feelings Identification Skill to say, “It seems like the princess is feeling scared.” Then you could switch back into your role as the dragon and say, “Oh no! I can’t find the princess.”

In Child-Directed Imaginary Play, as soon as your child loses interest in a particular imaginary play scenario, you would step out of your imaginary role and **terminate your role play**. You would keep your focus on your child and on the next play activity that your child has switched their interest to. Also, if your child starts to engage in unsafe or destructive behaviors, you would step out of your imaginary role and use the Limit-Setting Skill.

### **Let your child direct how the story unfolds**

Please remember, in Child-Directed Imaginary Play, the words and actions you give your character would be those that you think your child would want that character to say or do. You are keeping things neutral in the story and letting your child direct you on how the story unfolds.

With Child-Directed Imaginary Play, engaging in imaginary role-play with your child after being invited to do so can be challenging. You will need to take over the role of the character as directed by your child, meaning that you need to contribute something to the imaginary story without taking over the story! You should feel free to add emotion to your role such that you are neither too overwhelming or too passive; however, you must basically remain in a Nondirective Role.

In Child-Directed Playtime, the danger with joining in imaginary play is that, after being invited to participate in the play, parents can easily take over the imaginary story from their child so that it becomes parent-directed and not child-directed. Remember, parents are not trying to entertain their children with a story they are making up and playing out. Parents are following along as their children make up the story and direct their parents.

### **Negative themes**

Sometimes, children’s imaginary play themes may seem very negative to parents! As I mentioned earlier, children naturally incorporate real life situations into their play. This is normal and healthy and it means your child feels safe to express uncomfortable themes with you. Even if it seems uncomfortable to you, in Child-Directed Playtime, it is generally best to follow

your child's directions on what you should be doing and how you should be playing as long as the play remains safe and non-destructive.

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*Please see the section on the Engagement Skill in Chapter 8 for more of a discussion on how you can engage in imaginary play with your child when facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime, which is a different style of play than Child-Directed Playtime. When you wait for your child to invite you to join them in imaginary play (your child says, "Daddy, you be the teacher."), you are engaging in Child-Directed Playtime. When you initiate imaginary play (you say, "Let's play with your astronauts today and pretend they are going to explore a new planet."), you are engaging in Parent-Directed Playtime.*

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## Examples of Child-Directed Imaginary Play

### **Example #1: Becoming a shark**

If your child asks you to take on the role of a toy shark, you could pick it up and move it around in a swimming motion and say in a gruff voice whatever you think your child would want the shark to say. For example, you could say, "Mmmm, I'm hungry; what can I eat today? Where are all the fish?"

### **Example #2: "Dad, you be Spider-Man."**

If your child asks you to take on the role of a superhero toy, for example, Spider-Man, you would hold on to the toy and give voice to it by saying what you think your child would want the character to say. For example, you could say, "Hmm, I wish I had a friend to play with" or "I wonder what to do today" or "I wonder what's going to happen today." Your child may decide to take on the role of another character and start to direct what is going to happen in the play scenario.

### **Example #3: "You're the monster!"**

Your child says, "You're the monster!" You will role-play being a monster in the way your child likes, putting as much emotion into the role as you think your child would enjoy and not being too scary or too passive. You may put on a mask. You may act like a monster. You may say something like,

“Grrrrr, now I’m the monster and I’m hungry!” Your child may engage with you as another character, for example as a superhero or frightened victim. This interaction can continue for as long as your child wants. Your child will direct you on what to do if you do not act the way they want. Remember, it is very important to watch and listen to your child and to respect your child’s directions, especially if they are telling you to stop something. This play will continue with your child directing the storyline for as long as your child is interested in playing this pretend play scenario.

**Example #4: “Mom, you be the doctor.”**

Your child says, “You be the doctor.” That is your cue to take on the role of a doctor. You may gather up the toy medical items and set them up to make your “office.” If your child is carrying a baby doll, you may say something like, “Okay, now my office is open so come on in and sit on the chair here with the baby so I can listen to the baby’s heart” as you take out the toy stethoscope. You may check the baby or your child with the toy medical items if your child wants. Again, this interaction between the characters will continue according to your child’s directions and for as long as your child wants.

**Example #5: “Dad, let’s play store.”**

Your child has set up a store and says, “Let’s play store. You’re the daddy shopping.” You would say (taking a shopping basket) something you think your child would like you to say, for example, “Hmmm, I think I would like to buy some vegetables like this carrot and onion.” You then load up your shopping basket and take it to your child, who may be the cashier. You pay for the items with pretend money and then you take them to your “home.” Keep on playing in your role as the shopper and do as your child directs for as long as they are interested in this play scenario.

**Example #6: “You be the mom.”**

Your child has set up a dollhouse with furniture and little Playmobil people and says, “You be the mom.” You could take hold of the mom toy person, “walk” her around in the dollhouse, and say something like (taking on the mom’s voice) “Oh, now it’s time to get the kids up and get them ready for school. Here I go to wake them up. ‘Come on now kids, time to wake up.’”



You will keep on playing the role of the mom character in the way your child wants. This may mean your child adds more characters to the story or decides to have the characters go someplace else outside of the dollhouse. You would play along however your child directs you and follow along as the story unfolds according to your child's imagination. You would continue in your role only as long as your child is interested in that play scenario and would end your role-play when your child moves on to a different activity.

**Example #7: “You’re the teacher.”**

Your child says, “You’re the teacher” and has set up some paper and crayons on the table and sits down at the table. As the teacher, you could say something like, “Here are paper and crayons, children; today I want you to draw a garden.” You will continue with this role as teacher, maybe getting your child to do a school-related activity or go for lunch or recess if they want. This play will continue with your child directing the storyline for as long as your child is interested in playing school.

**Example #8: “Dad, you be the purple dragon.”**

Here is a more detailed example of what ten minutes of Child-Directed Imaginary Play might look like:

- Your child is playing with her dragon toys and says to you, “Dad, you be the purple dragon.”
- Using the Following Directions Skill, you tell your child, “Okay, I have ten minutes I can use to play with you now.” Then you take on the role of the purple dragon by taking hold of this dragon and moving it to where your child is.
- Your child takes hold of the green dragon as her character and starts to tell you the plot of the story by saying, “The dragons have to find a new home. Let’s go.” She then directs you to follow her dragon to a spot under the table.
- You take hold of your dragon and follow your child’s dragon under the table. You wait to see how the story unfolds.
- Your child says, “Now we have to build a wall,” and she starts to bring over some pillows and piles them up in front of the desk.

- Your dragon and her dragon are still under the desk as she builds the wall. You wait to see what happens next.
- Your child is satisfied with the wall and says, “Now the dragons need a bed.” She brings over the Lego and starts to build a bed and says to you, “You build a bed for your dragon.”
- You follow the directions and proceed to put some Lego blocks together to make a bed for your dragon.
- As you are doing this, your child corrects you and says, “No, don’t use any blue blocks,” so you remove the blue block from the bed you are making and continue building. You indicate that you are nearing the end of playtime by saying, “We have one more minute to play then we need to stop playing for now.”
- Your child then moves the pillows out of the way and puts her bed under the desk and her dragon on the bed and tells you to do the same.
- You proceed to do what she has told you.
- She then replaces the pillows in front of the desk. You end the playtime by saying, “Our time is up; time to stop playing for now.” What a great start to a fun play scenario that you can continue with your child another time!



*Please see Chapter 8: “Let’s play dragons today!” for an example of what ten minutes of Parent-Directed Imaginary Play would look like so you can compare it to the above example of Child-Directed Imaginary Play.*



**Since we just covered a lot of information in the above section on Child-Directed Imaginary Play, let’s review here before we go on.** Child-Directed Imaginary Play happens when children invite parents to join them in imaginary play by saying something like, “You be the dragon.” We looked at some ideas for pretending, giving voice to a character, and exaggerating emotions. We emphasized that in Child-Directed Imaginary Play, although

parents need to add something to the story to engage in the play, they should not take over the direction of how the story unfolds.

As you can see, Child-Directed Imaginary Play can include numerous scenarios and activities. While many parents find this type of play challenging, it is a very unique and special way to connect with your child!

## Examples of Following Directions When You Are Invited to Play a Game with Rules

Board games, card games, sports/active games, or any games or activities that have instructions or rules that need to be followed are called games with rules. In Child-Directed Playtime, if your child chooses to play a game with rules with you (“Mom, play Candyland with me.”), you would stay in a Nondirective Role and your goal would be to allow your child to play the game in whatever way they want. This means your child makes up all the rules and directs you on how to play the game. I call this the “Nondirective Way” to play a game with rules!

### What if my child wants to play by the rules?

Sometimes children will ask their parents to read the rules and tell them how to play. This is challenging because your child is directing you to be directive, and in Child-Directed Playtime, parents need to remain nondirective! In Child-Directed Playtime, if your child asks you how to play the game by the rules, you would respond by redirecting your child to make up their own rules. You could respond by saying something like:

- “Today you get to decide how to play this game.”
- “Let’s make up our own rules for the game today.”
- “Next time we play, I will read the rules and we will play by the rules, but today, let’s play the game however we want.”

Some parents even pretend they have lost or forgotten the rules of the game! I am always surprised at how creative children are in making up their own rules and how much fun they have in playing the game the way they want. Sometimes children think they have to play by the rules, so when

parents stay nondirective, it gives children the freedom to use their imaginations and creativity to make up their own games.

### **How to play a game with rules the “Nondirective Way”**

You may be wondering, “If I can’t teach my child the rules, how can we play the game?” Here’s how to play the “Nondirective Way” if your child asks you to play a game with rules together.

You would stay in a Nondirective Role and do the following:

- Using the Independence Skill: Give your child chances to make up their own rules and refrain from asking questions, from telling or suggesting to them what to do or not do, and from correcting them for not following the rules
- Using the Following Directions Skill: Follow your child’s directions unless it is unsafe or destructive to do so

You would also attune to your child empathically and acknowledge their actions, feelings, and preferences while playing the game by using the Empathic Skills as follows:

- Using the Describing Skill: Describe what is happening
- Using the Feelings Identification Skill: Identify any feelings, preferences, or perceptions coming up for your child in the game
- Using the Paraphrasing Skill: Paraphrase what your child is telling you
- Using the Encouragement Skill: Acknowledge your child’s efforts and strengths but refrain from praising your child

#### **Example: “Mom, play Candyland with me!”**

- The child says, “Mom, play Candyland with me.” The parent could say, “Okay! Looks like you want to play Candyland today.” (Feelings Identification Skill)
- The child takes the lid off the game and starts to set up the board. The parent could say, “First you are going to set up the board right there.” (Describing Skill)

- The child says, “We each get a marker,” and takes a marker and gives one to their parent. The parent could say, “Now you’re choosing the marker pieces, one for me and one for you.” (Paraphrasing Skill)
- The child says, “I go first” and starts shaking the dice. The parent says, “Okay! Now you’re shaking the dice for your turn.” (Describing Skill)
- The child moves their marker and indicates they want the parent to throw the dice. The parent follows the child’s directions and says, “Now it is my turn.” The parent rolls the dice and moves the marker. (Following Directions Skill)
- The child starts to fall behind the parent on the board and looks worried. The parent says, “You’re feeling a bit worried that you are getting behind; you really want to get ahead of me!” (Feelings Identification Skill)
- As the game progresses, the child structures the game so they are winning. The parent keeps following the child’s directions and does not try to correct the child. (Following Directions and Independence Skills)
- The parent notices the child’s excitement at being in the lead and says, “You’re really excited to be winning!” (Feelings Identification Skill)

Your child may lose interest in the game part way through and you may never really finish the game the way it is “supposed” to be finished. In Child-Directed Playtime, that is not a problem, and you would just leave the game whenever your child loses interest and follow them to whatever other activity they turn their attention to.

## **What happens when my child does not play by the “real” rules?**

You may also be asking yourself, “What do I do if my child knows the rules, but decides not to follow them?” Your child may be very directive to you and could tell you to do something that is against the “real” rules of the game, or your child may be purposely structuring the game so they are winning, such as flipping cards over when they should not be flipped, taking an extra turn, etc. Younger children will frequently make up their own rules that have nothing to do with the “real” rules and will favour themselves winning. Older

children may have played the game before according to the “real” rules and may have some idea of how to play, but for whatever reason, may decide not to follow the rules.

In Child-Directed Playtime, you do not correct your child for not playing by the “real” rules, but rather you would follow along, using the Empathic Skills to acknowledge your child’s actions, feelings, and preferences, and accept the way your child is directing you and how they are structuring the game.

Here are some examples of what you could say:

- The child says, “No, it is not your turn” when it really is your turn. The parent says, “Oh, I see, it’s not my turn yet.” (Paraphrasing Skill)
- The child picks a card, puts it down, and then picks another card, which is against the “real” rules. The parent says, “You didn’t like that card, so you are not going to use it and you are going to choose another card.” (Feelings Identification and Describing Skills)
- The child says, “That’s wrong!” (when it is not) and moves their parent’s marker to a different spot and says, “You have to go here!” The parent says, “Oh, I see, you didn’t want me to get on that spot, so you are moving me to a different spot.” (Paraphrasing and Feelings Identification Skills)
- The child moves a marker to a spot, then realizes they don’t like it and moves to another spot. The parent says, “You didn’t want to go there so you moved to another spot.” (Feelings Identification Skill)
- The child says, “You can’t do that” when in fact you can. The parent says, “You don’t want me to take that card so you are giving me a different one.” (Feelings Identification and Describing Skills)
- The child takes their turn rolling the dice, but does not like the number and says, “That didn’t count. I get another turn” and rolls again. The parent notices child’s frustration and says, “You’re frustrated when you keep rolling the dice and don’t get the number you want, so you’re going to roll again.” (Feelings Identification Skill)

Here is an example where the parent is unsure of exactly what to do and asks the child for more specific details:

- The child says, “No, you can’t go that many spaces!” when the parent went the correct number. The parent says, “Oh, how many spaces should I go?”

## Playing competitively with your child

Should you play competitively with your child? That’s a great question. Young children want to win in any competitive activity, so in games with rules, your child will likely want the play to favour them winning. In Child-Directed Playtime, when your child wants to play a game with rules with you, your goal is to play in a way that generates lots of positive feelings with your child and not to overwhelm them by being too competitive or making the game overly challenging. In Child-Directed Playtime, the goal is not for you to win, challenge your child to master something, or teach your child a specific skill. Teaching, challenging, and correcting your child can certainly be done outside of Child-Directed Playtime (during Parent-Directed Playtime, for example). During Child-Directed Playtime, you do not play competitively with your child unless they direct you to.

I found that many parents found the “Nondirective Way” of playing games with their children difficult to understand and challenging to carry out. I completely understand! Parents are normally told to help their children learn and play by the rules of the game. Parents want their children to learn to play fair, to take turns, to win respectfully, and to be a good loser. The Nondirective Way of playing games with rules, in which you let your child take control of the game, seems counterintuitive at best and harmful at worst.

However, children do need to experience the feeling of being in control and being the winner, the best, or first before they can learn to manage the frustration and disappointment of things not going their way and accept playing by the rules where there is a chance they will lose or not be the best.

Child-Directed Playtime provides children with the opportunity to experience being in control and being the winner of a game. This is important for the development of a child’s confidence. As children develop socially and emotionally, they will gradually learn to accept losing, and winning all the time will become boring, so they will want to play in a more challenging manner where it is not so easy to win. Chances are very high that early on in a child’s development, the child’s way of playing a game with rules will favour the child winning, and in Child-Directed Playtime, this is not a problem.

A child will eventually want to play by the real rules, but in Child-Directed Playtime, it is up to the child to direct the parent in how the game plays out.

## Why Use the Following Directions Skill?

Children may frequently experience feelings of powerlessness in their lives. When children experience a sense of being in control, even if it is only in a play situation, their sense of safety and security is strengthened, which is so very important for healthy child development.

Following your child's directions may seem uncomfortable to many parents. It is generally accepted that children should not, for the most part, tell their parents what to do! However, in a play situation such as Child-Directed Playtime, it is okay for parents to let go of their power somewhat so that their child gets some sense of being in control. This is important for the development of children's self-esteem and self-responsibility.

## Getting Started Activity #6: Practice Using the Following Directions Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Nondirective Role by using the Following Directions Skill in combination with the Independence Skill and the four Empathic Skills. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3 and 4 ahead of time.

When you use the Following Directions Skill in Child-Directed Playtime, you will **wait for your child to give you directions to do something**. However, to practice this skill, you will need to put yourself temporarily into a Directive Role to set up certain situations ahead of time to encourage this type of play between you and your child. You will switch to a Nondirective Role when your child is engaged in the activity you have set up.

This activity can really involve **three separate activities**:

- a. Doing a task your child asks you to do
- b. Engaging in imaginary play with your child
- c. Playing a game with rules together

Plan for the activity to last about fifteen minutes. Let your child know you have fifteen minutes to play when you begin. Give your child a five and/



or one-minute warning before the end of your playtime, and then let your child know when playtime is finished. After each activity, reflect afterwards on what happened. Use the Parent-Monitoring form to check your progress.

### **Activity #6(a): Doing a task your child asks you to do**

**Instructions:** Think of an activity that your child enjoys, such as building with Lego or blocks, drawing, putting furniture in the dollhouse, setting up a zoo, or playing with Play-doh. Invite your child to participate in setting up this activity and start setting up this activity together (Note: You are actually putting yourself in a Directive Role here and using the Engagement Skill).

Then, put yourself in a Nondirective Role by using the Independence Skill and refrain from giving any further directions to your child or doing anything further yourself. Start watching your child and use the Empathic Skills to describe actions, identify feelings, paraphrase what is being said, and be encouraging.

Ideally, your child will give you some directions on what you should do. When this happens, use the Following Directions Skill to follow these directions. Your child will correct you if you do it wrong. If they don't give you any directions or if you are really unsure, you may ask a brief question, such as "What would you like me to do?" Continue using the Empathic Skills and remind yourself to refrain from directing or questioning your child.

If your child is asking you to do something unsafe or destructive, you would not do what they have directed, but rather you would redirect them to an appropriate behavior.

### **Activity #6(b): Engaging in imaginary play with your child**

**Instructions:** Think of some kind of imaginary or pretend play that your child enjoys, such as playing doctor, pretending to be a pirate, or making up a story with superheroes or princesses. Decide on a specific pretend theme and set things up as part of that play scenario. For example, get out the medical kit and baby doll, the pirate dress-up clothes, or the superheroes or princesses. Invite your child to participate in an imaginary play scenario. You may want to suggest that you will take on one of the roles and your child take on another ("Let's play with the princesses. I will be Anna. Who do you want to be?"). Then, get into your role and pretend to be that character ("Hi Elsa, what shall we do today?").

Please remember, for this activity, you are actually taking on a Directive Role and using the Engagement Skill to set things up and get the imaginary play started. For actual Child-Directed Playtime, you would wait for your child to invite you to play and to tell you what to do.

As soon as your child is engaged in the imaginary play story, you would switch to a Nondirective Role. Using the Following Directions Skill, you would play out your imaginary role how you think your child wants you to play. Your child will correct you if you play the way they don't want you to, so just follow directions. If you are really unsure of what to do, ask your child how they would like you to play.

Remember to keep in mind the Independence Skill and let your child determine how the imaginary story unfolds. Your child is the director of the story! Also, if your child is asking you to do something unsafe or destructive, you would not do what they have directed, but rather you would redirect your child to an appropriate behavior.

### **Activity #6(c): Playing a game with rules together**

**Instructions:** Think of a board or card game that your child enjoys. Get the game out but don't set it up. In a Directive Role using the Engagement Skill, invite your child to play the game, but indicate that you two can make up your own rules today. ("Let's make up our own rules today.")

Then get into a Nondirective Role. Using the Independence and Following Directions Skill, let your child set things up and then follow their directions and play the way they direct you. Remember please, no directions, suggestions, or corrections from you on how to play the "right" way, and no questions to your child!

As you play according to your child's directions, you can also use the Empathic Skills (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, Encouragement Skills) to connect and interact with your child.

Again, if your child is asking you to do something unsafe or destructive, you would not do what they have directed, but rather you would redirect them to an appropriate behavior.

### **Parent Self-Monitoring: The Following Directions Skill**

During Child-Directed Playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

I wait for my child to ask me to join them in a play activity and then I stay in a Nondirective Role, following their directions and playing according to how they want.

0

10

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If my child does not ask me to join them in a play activity, there is no need to use the Following Directions Skill. However, I will still be part of the playtime by using all the other Nondirective Skills.

0

10

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If my child does something unsafe or destructive or asks me to do something unsafe or destructive, I would switch to a Directive Role and redirect my child to something more appropriate or stop the inappropriate behavior.

0

10

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I try to guess how my child would want me to do what I am being asked to do, but if I am completely baffled, I can ask a brief question to get more specific directions, such as “How do you want me to do it?” or “Where do you want me to put it?”

0

10

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If my child asks me to join in play by doing a particular task or engaging in an activity, I will follow my child’s directions, as long as the task or activity does not take an extended period of time that would take away from interacting with my child in play.

0

10

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If my child chooses to do an activity with instructions, I will not teach or correct my child during this activity, but will support my child in doing the activity their way.

0 10

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If my child asks me to take on an imaginary role, for example as a pirate, a superhero, a teacher, or a doctor, either as myself or through a toy, I step into the role of the specific character and act this role out following the directions of my child. I put emotion into the role such that I am neither too overwhelming nor too passive.

0 10

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When engaging in imaginary play at my child's request, I do not take over the story; it is as if I am an actor in the story and my child is the director.

0 10

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If my child chooses to play a game with rules with me, I play in such a way that my child makes up the rules and directs me on how to play the game.

0 10

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When my child has asked me to join in play, I stay focused on my child, and as soon as they lose interest in the particular play activity we are engaging in together, I stop using the Following Directions Skill and go back to using the other Nondirective Skills.

0 10

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## Chapter Summary

In this chapter we examined in detail the two Autonomy Skills. These skills, when used with the Empathic Skills, will support parents in getting into a Nondirective Role for Child-Directed Playtime. These important skills are:

- The Independence Skill—allow your child to make choices and decisions
- The Following Directions Skill—follow your child's directions

The objective of using the Autonomy Skills is to allow your child to take control and to lead and direct the play activity. These skills provide your child with a sense of autonomy and are very important for the development of your child's independence and self-identity.

The Autonomy Skills are what make Child-Directed Playtime unique. These skills are the foundation for the Nondirective Role and will provide children with opportunities to make their own choices and decisions. These skills may seem unfamiliar at first for many parents; however, they can become important skills in any parent's toolbox.

# Chapter 5:

## The Limit-Setting Skill

The Limit-Setting Skill is a Directive Role Skill, meaning when you set limits with your child, you are taking control by putting yourself in a Directive Role to prevent unsafe and destructive behaviors from happening and also to teach your child that these behaviors are unacceptable. The Limit-Setting Skill is used in both Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime.

### Why Use the Limit-Setting Skill?

Setting limits in playtime is important and provides boundaries for your child, which is necessary for a child's sense of physical and emotional security as well as for the development of a healthy parent-child relationship. When parents use the Limit-Setting Skill, they are helping their children learn self-control and to take responsibility for their behaviors.

Setting limits also gives you the control to keep the play safe and non-destructive, which in turn allows you to maintain warm and accepting feelings towards your child. If your child is allowed to be physically aggressive towards you or destructive to objects, you will likely experience feelings of anger, resentment, and frustration, which is something to be avoided during playtime, since those feelings from parent to child can create a break in the parent-child relationship.

Your child learns that all feelings and desires are accepted by you, but not all behaviors will be accepted. Although a child may express a desire to

hit a parent or to break something, these unsafe or destructive behaviors are limited by the parent. When there are no boundaries or limitations and there is too much freedom for children, they may feel insecure and anxious and may also behave in out of control ways.

The Limit-Setting Skill will also facilitate your child's ability to practice self-control and self-regulation because your child is informed of what the inappropriate behavior is and is then given a choice to either continue to engage in the inappropriate behavior or to choose a more appropriate behavior.

I found that the Limit-Setting Skill was one of the more difficult play skills for parents to master when I was teaching them play skills. Even play therapists find setting limits with children to be one of the more difficult parts of therapy! This is because emotions begin to escalate quickly when limits need to be set. Also, many parents do not have a clear understanding of limit setting because there are so many different and conflicting discipline techniques that are recommended to parents.

There are many ways to set limits with children. I will outline one protocol here that can be used not only during playtime, but also during real life outside of playtime.

## How Do You Use This Skill?

If your child intends to do, or is actually doing, something unsafe or destructive, use the Limit-Setting Skill to prevent or stop this behavior. In both Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, **unsafe and destructive behaviors by the child are not allowed** and it is the parent's responsibility to ensure that the playtime stays safe.

Having some limits is very important in playtime and should not be neglected. Limits are generally set for your child during playtime to prevent:

- Hurting oneself or others, and
- Damaging or breaking things

The method outlined here has three steps to it and focuses on teaching your child to make the right choices:

- **Step 1: Setting the Limit:** Communicate the limit or rule to your child, identifying inappropriate and/or appropriate behaviors. Supplemental parts to Step 1 include:
    - Acknowledging your child's feelings
    - Redirecting your child to a more appropriate behavior, including giving choices to your child
- Step 1 can be repeated several times.
- **Step 2: Providing a Warning of a Consequence:** Give your child a warning of a specific consequence that will happen the next time the limit or rule is broken and your child engages in the inappropriate behavior again. Step 2 is not repeated.
  - **Step 3: Enforcing the Consequence:** If the inappropriate behavior happens again after the warning has been given in Step 2, you will enforce the consequence immediately.



*You might find this interesting:*

*When I was working with children as a play therapist, I certainly did have to use the Limit-Setting Skill in my playroom, generally for children being too rough with the toys, throwing hard toys, getting too physically aggressive towards me in play, doing something unsafe, or excessively spilling water, sand, or paint (I had paints, a small sandbox, and container of water in my playroom). The really interesting thing I found was that most children would respond well to this Limit-Setting protocol and respect the limits I set in Step 1 when I stated them clearly (possibly repeating them two or three times). I rarely ever used Step 2 and used Step 3 probably less than five times in all the years I worked with children. With this Limit-Setting protocol, children appeared to prefer respecting the limits rather than testing or breaking the limits.*





## Step 1: Setting the Limit

Step 1 is communicating a limit or rule to your child in a clear and concise manner. Rules and limits differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors for your child. In Step 1, you will communicate to your child what the inappropriate behavior is that needs to be limited and/or what the appropriate behavior is that should be followed. You may also communicate to your child a brief reason for the limit.

The following are examples of some common inappropriate child behaviors seen during playtime and what you could say to communicate the limit or rule to your child:

- The child hits the parent in anger/frustration. The parent says, “No hitting me. Hitting is not okay. Hitting hurts me.”
- The child starts to jump on the couch. The parent says, “It’s not okay to jump on the couch. The couch is not for jumping on.”
- The child starts to climb on the bookshelf to see what is on the top shelf. The parent says, “The bookshelf is not for climbing on. It’s not safe.”
- The child starts running around on a slippery floor. The parent says, “No running on the slippery floor with your socks on.”
- The child and the parent are rolling a hard plastic ball to each other on the floor and the child starts to throw the ball up high around the room, nearly hitting the lamp. The parent says, “This ball needs to stay on the floor when we are playing with it.”
- The child throws a toy car at the wall in frustration. The parent says, “You may not throw the car. That’s too dangerous.”
- The child is pulling on a stretchy toy very hard and it looks like the toy may break. The parent says, “No pulling hard on that stretchy caterpillar, or it might break in half.”
- The child is playing very roughly with a boat that looks like it may get broken. The parent says, “That is too rough for the boat, it might break.”

- The child is twirling a paintbrush and paint is getting splattered on the wall. The parent says, “Paint needs to stay on the paper and not get splattered on the wall.”
- The child is playing with toys and water in the sink or in a container and is starting to splash water out of the sink or the container. The parent says, “Water needs to stay in the sink/container.”
- The child starts to touch the parent’s glasses. The parent says, “My glasses are not for touching.”
- The child has asked the parent to be the bad guy and the child has hit the parent hard during this play. The parent says, “Ouch! This is pretend play; that was too hard a hit.”
- The child has asked the parent to play sword-fighting with toy swords, and during this play the child has started to get close to hitting the parent in the face with the sword. The parent says, “Stop! This is pretend play and no one gets hurt. No sticking the sword close to my face.”

## Supplementing Step 1

Parents can supplement Step 1 by including a couple of other strategies in addition to communicating the limit as described above. One way is by including an acknowledgement of your child’s feelings as you communicate the limit. Another way is by re-directing your child to a more appropriate behavior after you have communicated the limit.

Remember, however, you must always communicate the limit or rule by stating the inappropriate and/or appropriate behaviors clearly to your child in Step 1. Acknowledging feelings and re-directing your child, although very important and should be used frequently, can be considered optional in Step 1 in certain situations.

### a) Acknowledging feelings

It is important to acknowledge your child’s feelings or experiences around the behavior that is needing to be limited. To acknowledge feelings, you would use the Feelings Identification Skill. Remember, you can acknowledge feelings and still limit behaviors. Here are some examples of how you

could acknowledge your child's feelings or experiences by using the Feelings Identification Skill while at the same time setting a limit and not giving in to your child:

- “I can see you are really mad at me, but hitting me is not okay.”
- “You are feeling really excited, but it is not okay to jump on the couch.”
- “You are really curious to see what is on top, but the bookshelf is not for climbing on.”
- “You’re feeling silly, but the floor is too slippery for running on with your socks.”
- “You are having so much fun, but this ball needs to stay on the floor when we are playing with it.”
- “I can see you are very frustrated, but you may not throw the car.”
- “You really like pulling that stretchy caterpillar, but no pulling hard on it, or it might break in half.”
- “Looks like you want that boat to be in a big storm, but that’s too rough for the boat.”
- “Uh, oh, looks like you didn’t mean to splatter the paint on the wall, but paint needs to stay on the paper.”
- “You like playing with the dishes in the water, but water stays in the sink.”
- “You are interested in my glasses, but my glasses are not for touching.”
- “Wow, I know I’m the bad guy and you are really angry with me, but this is pretend play and that was too hard a hit.”
- “Oh, you are really a fierce warrior and feeling very brave, but remember this is pretend and no one gets hurt; no sticking the sword in my face.”

## **b) Redirection**

A second important way to supplement Step 1 is a redirection of your child to a more appropriate behavior. This gives your child an opportunity

to continue to express feelings or experience the play, but also gives your child an idea of what would be an appropriate behavior to go along with this feeling or experience. Notice also that by redirecting by offering choices, children will feel like they have a say in what to do. Here are some examples where you are redirecting your child to a more appropriate behavior:

- “No hitting me. Show me how mad you are a different/safer way that won’t hurt anybody or break anything.”
- “You are feeling really excited, but it is not okay to jump on the couch. If you want to jump, you can jump on this pillow.”
- “Remember, the bookshelf is not for climbing on. Let’s get the stool for you to climb on.”
- “The floor is too slippery for running on when you are wearing your socks. If you want to run on the floor, you can take your socks off or you can put your slippers on.”
- “This hard ball needs to stay on the floor. If you want to throw a ball up high, you can choose to use this red foam ball or this soft blue ball.”
- “You may not throw the car, even though I can see you are very frustrated. Show me a different/safer way of letting me know how frustrated you are.”
- “You like pulling that stretchy caterpillar, but no pulling hard on it or it might break in half. If you want to pull on something, you can choose to pull on this stretchy elastic or on this piece of rope.”
- “Oh no, it looks like the boat is in a big storm, but that’s too rough for this boat. Maybe you could use this (a small cardboard box) for the boat, or you might want to choose to use this (harder plastic) boat.”
- “Remember I said paint needs to stay on the paper. You could use a bigger piece of paper or you could stop twirling the paintbrush and try a different movement so that paint stays on the paper.”
- “You like playing with the dishes in the water, but water stays in the sink. You could also drain the water out of the sink and keep playing with the dishes.”

- “You want to touch my glasses, but my glasses are not for touching. You can play with these toy glasses or you can pretend you are wearing glasses by putting your fingers in circles around your eyes.”
- “Remember, this is pretend play and that was too hard a hit. You can tap me instead of hitting me.”
- “Remember this is pretend and no one gets hurt. No sticking the sword in my face; we can only tap our swords on each other below the neck.”

## Repeating Step 1

The interesting thing is that you can keep repeating Step 1 as many times as you want before you decide to move on to Step 2. Often, repeating Step 1 is the best choice because it supports the child in understanding what the inappropriate behavior is as well as in learning to take responsibility for choosing appropriate behaviors.

It can be frustrating for parents to keep repeating limits; however, this may be the best choice in certain situations for gaining compliance from your child before moving on to Step 2. In my experience, I often found that repeating Step 1 two or three times was all that was required for a child to respect the limit I had set which meant I did not need to move on to Step 2 or 3. Moving on to Step 2 and 3 should generally be used as a last resort because it usually increases emotional arousal levels significantly. That being said, you would not want to keep endlessly repeating Step 1 while your child continually ignores the limits you are setting.

Here is what repeating Step 1 four separate times would look like for the inappropriate behavior of your child running on a slippery floor with socks:

1. Your child starts running around on a slippery floor. You say, “No running on the slippery floor with your socks on.”
2. Your child continues to run on the slippery floor. You say, “I can see you’re feeling silly, but the floor is too slippery for running on when you are wearing your socks. Only walking is allowed on the slippery floor with your socks on.”

3. After several minutes, your child starts to run on the slippery floor again. You say, “Uh-oh, remember I told you only walking is allowed on the slippery floor when you have your socks on. No running.”
4. Again, after several minutes, your child starts to run on the slippery floor. You say, “Stop running! The floor is too slippery for running on with your socks. If you want to run on the floor, you can take your socks off or you can put on your slippers. What would you like to do?” You then monitor your child to observe what your child does.

## Step 2: Providing a Warning of a Consequence

Step 2 involves giving your child a warning of a possible consequence that will be carried out if they do not respect the limit or rule and continue with the inappropriate behavior you have outlined in Step 1.

You would move on to using Step 2 after you have used Step 1 at least once, and possibly several times, and your child continues to be noncompliant with the limit. In other words, you have been making the limits clear to your child by outlining what is appropriate or inappropriate behavior and your child is not following your directions or complying with your limits and continues with the inappropriate behavior.

Step 2 consists of a re-statement of the limit or rule that includes identification of what the inappropriate behavior is and a statement of what will happen (the consequence) if the rule or limit is broken and the inappropriate behavior happens again.

### Consequences

In Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, the consequence would be related to the play activity you are engaging in with your child and would have a specific time limit. There are generally three ways of handling consequences:

- The parent could take away and put out of the child’s reach a toy or item that is being misused. The toy or item would be removed from the child for a period of time. This could be for several minutes or it could be until the end of the playtime. The parent could also choose

to put the toy away for even longer, such as for several hours or even overnight until the next day.

- The parent could end an activity that they and the child are engaged in and that has become problematic for the child. For example, if the child has engaged the parent in playing a sword-fighting game, and the parent has set limits several times for not being hit in the face, but the child continues to try to hit the parent in the face, the parent could end the sword-fighting game for at least several minutes or for the rest of their playtime.
- The parent could stop engaging altogether in playtime with their child. This could be for a fairly short length of time, such as taking a time-out for five or ten minutes, or it could be taking a longer break, say for several hours or even until the next day before resuming playtime.

These consequences are basically the removal of either a toy or your attention and do not necessarily have to last a long time. Sometimes a child only needs the consequence to last for five to ten minutes. Sometimes it is best for the consequence to last for the rest of the playtime. And sometimes it would be most effective if the consequence lasted for several hours or for the rest of the day. In any case, the consequence would not last longer than overnight.

Here are some examples of what Step 2 would look like (after using Step 1 at least once):

- “Remember, I have told you no hitting me. If you choose to hit me again, then we will stop our playtime.”
- “Remember I have told you it is not okay to jump on the couch. If you decide to jump on the couch again, then we will need to end our playtime for now.”
- “I know you are really curious about the toys on the top shelf, but remember I have told you the bookshelf is not for climbing on. If you climb on the bookshelf again, I will put the toys that are on the top of the bookshelf away for today.”
- “I have told you the floor is too slippery for running on when you are wearing your socks. If you choose to keep running without taking

your socks off or putting your slippers on, we will have to stop playing this game.”

- “This ball needs to stay on the floor when we are rolling it. If you throw this ball up high again, I will put this ball away for today.”
- “Remember I told you that you may not throw the car. If you throw the car again, then I will put the car away for a while.”
- “No pulling hard on that stretchy caterpillar or it might break in half. If you keep pulling it, I will put it away for today.”
- “That is too rough for the boat; that part might break off. If you choose to keep playing too roughly with it, I will have to put the boat away for now.”
- “Paint needs to stay on the paper and not get splattered on the wall. If the paint gets splattered on the wall again, we will need to put the paints away for today.”
- “Water stays in the sink (or in this container). If the water keeps getting splashed out of the sink, you will not be allowed to play with the water for now and I will drain the sink/pour the water out.”
- “My glasses are not for touching. If you choose to keep touching my glasses, then we will have to end our playtime for now.”
- “Remember what I said; this is pretend play and that was too hard a hit. If you hit me hard again, we will have to stop playing this game.”
- “Remember I said that this is pretend play and you can’t stick the sword in my face. If you decide to stick the sword in my face again, we will end this game.”

You should be aware that your child may break the limit and repeat the inappropriate behavior even after you have used Step 2 and warned your child of the consequence. This is why it is important to monitor your child for compliance after you have used Step 2, and if your child does break the limit and repeat the inappropriate behavior, then you **must** carry on to Step 3, which is enforcing the consequence you have warned about in Step 2, right away.



Hopefully, though, your child will be compliant with you and not repeat the inappropriate behavior after you have used Step 2. If your child is compliant with the limit after you have used Step 2, there is no need, of course, to move on to Step 3.

However, you must be prepared to actually carry out the consequence you warn your child about in Step 2 the very next time the inappropriate behavior happens. Step 2 should be used only once (for each inappropriate behavior) and should not be repeated because if you keep repeating the warning, your child will learn that your warning of a possible consequence for an inappropriate behavior is meaningless.

### **Step 3: Enforcing the Consequence**

Step 3 is enforcing the consequence that your child was warned about in Step 2. Step 3 happens only after Step 2 and only if your child remains non-compliant and continues to engage in the inappropriate behavior. After you have used Step 2 and have given the warning of the consequence, you **MUST** carry out Step 3 immediately without any negotiation if the inappropriate behavior happens again.

Step 3 contains a reminder of the inappropriate behavior and the consequence that you have warned the child about, and a statement of why you are now enforcing the consequence. This is then immediately followed by carrying out the consequence.

Here are the examples of what Step 3 would be like after your child has broken the limit or rule again after you have used Step 2:

- “No hitting me. Remember I told you If you choose to hit me again, then we would stop playing. Since you chose to hit me again, we need to stop playing now.” The parent would then disengage from play with the child.
- “Remember I have told you it is not okay to jump on the couch. Since you decided to jump on the couch again, we are going to end our playtime for now.” The parent would then disengage from play with the child.
- “The bookshelf is not for climbing on. Since you climbed on the bookshelf again, I am going to put the toys that are on top of the

bookshelf away for today.” The parent puts the toys on the top shelf away out of reach of the child for the rest of the day.

- “Remember I told you the floor is too slippery for running when you wear your socks. Since you are still running with your socks on, we have to stop playing this game.” The parent would then disengage from playing that game with the child.
- “Remember I told you we have to roll this ball on the floor and if you threw this ball up high we would have to stop playing with the ball. Since you threw this ball up high again, we have to stop playing with this ball today.” The parent puts the ball away out of reach of the child for the rest of the day.
- “You are not allowed to throw the car. I told you if you threw the car again I would put the car away. Since you chose to throw that car again, I am going to put the car away now.” The parent takes the car away and puts it out of reach of the child for a period of time but not longer than overnight.
- “I told you that we would put the stretchy caterpillar away if you kept pulling on it. Since you are still pulling on it, I will put it away for today.” The parent takes the caterpillar away and puts it out of reach of the child for the rest of the day.
- “Remember I told you that you would not be allowed to play with the boat if you kept playing roughly with it. Since you chose to keep on playing roughly with the boat, I am taking the boat away for now.” The parent takes the boat and puts it out of reach of the child for a period of time but not longer than overnight.
- “Uh oh, paint is still getting splattered on the wall. Remember I told you we would have to put the paints away if paint does not stay on the paper. I am going to put the paints away for now.” The parent puts away the paints for a period of time but not longer than overnight.
- “Oh no, water is still getting splashed out of the sink/container. I said you would not be allowed to play with the water if it kept getting splashed out, so no more water play right now.” The parent empties the sink/container of water.

- “Remember I said we would have to end our playtime if you kept touching my glasses. Since you decided to keep touching my glasses, we need to end our playtime for now.” The parent moves away from the child so their glasses are out of the child’s reach and disengages from play with the child for a period of time.
- “Remember what I said; if you hit me hard again, we will have to stop playing this game. Since you hit me hard again, we are going to stop playing this game now.” The parent disengages from playing the role of the bad guy.
- “Remember I said that this is pretend play and you can’t stick the sword in my face. Since you decided to stick the sword in my face again, we are going to end this game for now.” The parent puts the foam sword away and disengages from playing sword-fighting with the child.

## Dealing with the consequences of enforcing the consequence

It is very, very common for a child to become unhappy, upset, or angry when you use Step 3. This can be very unpleasant for both you and your child, and it actually creates a break in the relationship you are trying to build with your child in playtime. For this reason, Step 2 and Step 3 should be used only when absolutely necessary. That is why it is so important to set up your play environment so that it is child-friendly and contains things that are age-appropriate for your child to engage in so that you don’t need to keep setting limits with your child for unsafe or destructive behavior.

If you do have to carry out Steps 2 and 3, be prepared for resistance from your child in the form of crying, screaming, yelling, and rude comments. This is normal! It is important for you to remain calm at this point and not to react to your child. Remember to not take this resistance personally! Take some deep breaths and remind yourself this is normal behavior for your child and will pass. They are learning to manage difficult feelings.

It is generally best to not engage any further with your child at this point about the broken limit, other than ensuring the consequence is carried out. This is a good time to **ignore** whining, complaints, crying, and rude language. Additionally, you can **redirect** your child to a different activity that

would distract them from the difficult experience of the consequence being enforced! Later, after your child has calmed down, you can discuss together the reasons behind the limits, your feelings, your child's feelings, and more appropriate behaviors to handle difficult feelings in the future.

If your child does resort to unsafe or destructive behaviours after carrying out Step 3, for example your child hits you in anger after you have taken away a toy, you will need to step in and take control of the situation. Use whatever positive discipline strategies work for you, for example, removal of privileges or time-out. Remember, though, physical punishment is no longer acceptable as a discipline strategy. Please see Siegel and Bryson (2014) for some wonderful ideas for using discipline strategies to teach children healthy skills for everyday life experiences.

## Getting Started Activity #7: Practice Using the Limit-Setting Skill

Choose a particular behavior to practice the Limit-Setting Skill with, something that would be similar to what could happen during playtime with your child. Here are some examples:

- Drawing with a marker on the wall
- Throwing a hard toy
- Hitting you too hard during imaginary play

### Develop a plan ahead of time

Set some time aside for yourself to develop a plan for using the Limit-Setting Skill with the behavior you have chosen. The idea is to set up a plan ahead of time that takes you through all 3 steps even though you may not use all of the steps.

**Step 1:** Write down exactly what you will say to your child for Step 1 when you notice your child engaging in, or about to engage in, the particular behavior:

- “The wall is not for drawing on. Use the markers on the paper only.”
- “No throwing the car. It is too hard and might hurt someone.”

- “Ouch! That was too hard. Remember this is pretend play, so tap on me instead of hitting me.”

Write down possible responses from your child and how you would respond. Remember you can repeat Step 1, and it is helpful to use the supplementary steps to Step 1.

**Step 2:** Write down what you would say if your child keeps repeating the inappropriate behavior and you decide to move on to Step 2:

- “Remember I told you the wall is not for drawing on. If you decide to keep drawing on the wall, I will take away the markers for today.”
- “Remember I told you no throwing the car. If you choose to throw the car again, I will put it away for today.”
- “Ouch, that hurt. Remember I told you we are just pretending and we can tap but not hit. If you hit me again, we will stop playing together.”

Write down possible responses from your child and how you would respond.

**Step 3:** Write down what you would say and do the next time your child repeats the inappropriate behavior and you move on to Step 3:

- “Remember I told you the wall is not for drawing on. Since you chose to draw on the wall again, I will take away the markers for today.”  
Then you put the markers away for the day.
- “Remember I told you no throwing the car. Since you decided to throw the car again, I am going to put it away for today.” Then you take the car and put it away.
- “Ouch, that hurt. Remember I told you we are just pretending and we can tap but not hit. Since you hit me hard instead of tapping me, we need to stop playing this game.” You then stop playing that game with your child.

Write down possible responses from your child and how you would respond.

## Using your plan

Once you have a plan, monitor your child throughout the day, and when you notice your child engaging in, or just about to engage in, the inappropriate behavior you want to limit, use the plan that you have set up ahead of time to limit the behavior.

After using your plan, reflect afterwards on what happened. Use the Parent-Monitoring form below to check your progress with the Limit-Setting Skill.

## Parent Self-Monitoring: The Limit-Setting Skill

During playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

I ensure that the play area is safe and child-friendly so that I don't need to continually set limits for unsafe or destructive behaviors.

0 10

---

I use Step 1, Setting the Limit, to set limits around unsafe or destructive behaviors in order to keep the play safe. I am communicating these limits to my child in a clear and concise manner by identifying what the appropriate and/or inappropriate behaviors are.

0 10

---

I am frequently supplementing Step 1 by acknowledging my child's feelings around the behavior in question, without giving in to my child, by using the Feelings Identification Skill.

0 10

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I am frequently supplementing Step 1 by redirecting my child from the inappropriate behavior to a more appropriate behavior, sometimes by offering my child a choice.

0 10

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In certain situations, I will repeat the limit to my child in order to help my child learn the appropriate and inappropriate behaviors.

0 10

---

If I have used Step 1 at least once, and possibly several times, and my child has been consistently noncompliant in following the limit or respecting the rule, I move on to Step 2, giving the Warning of a Consequence.

0 10

---

When I use Step 2, Warning of a Consequence, I am identifying the limit around what the inappropriate behavior is and I am warning my child of a specific consequence if the inappropriate behavior happens again.

0 10

---

Consequences used in playtime are related to the play activity I am engaged in with my child and fall within the following categories: a) removal of a specific toy or thing that is being misused, b) ending the specific play activity that is problematic, or c) ending playtime altogether.

0 10

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Consequences would be in effect for specific periods of time that would vary from several minutes to several hours, or even overnight, depending on the situation.

0 10

---

I only use Step 2 once if necessary and do not repeat Step 2.

0 10

---

After using Step 2, I monitor my child for compliance with the limit and I am prepared to immediately move on to Step 3, Enforcing the Consequence, the very next time the inappropriate behavior occurs after using Step 2.

0

10

---

If my child engages in the inappropriate behavior again after I have used Step 2, giving the Warning of a Consequence, I immediately move on to Step 3, Enforcing the Consequence.

0

10

---

For Step 3, I remind my child of the inappropriate behavior, the related consequence, and the reason for enforcement, and I immediately carry out the consequence.

0

10

---

With Step 3, I am prepared for resistance from my child in the form of anger, crying, yelling, etc. I carry out the consequence calmly and ignore minor misbehaviors like whining, complaining, rude language, crying, etc. and deal with major misbehaviors with positive discipline.

0

10

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## Chapter Summary

In this chapter we examined in detail the Limit-Setting Skill, which is used in both Child-Directed and Parent-Directed Playtimes to prevent unsafe and destructive behaviors from happening and also to teach your child that these behaviors are unacceptable. Parents put themselves into a Directive Role when they use the Limit-Setting Skill.

Setting limits in playtime is important and provides boundaries for your child. Boundaries are necessary for a child's sense of physical and emotional security as well as for the development of a healthy parent-child relationship.



There are many ways to set limits with children. I outline the following limit-setting protocol in this book:

- **Step 1: Setting the Limit:** Communicate the limit or rule to your child, identifying inappropriate and/or appropriate behaviors. Supplemental parts to Step 1 include:
  - acknowledging your child's feelings
  - redirecting your child to a more appropriate behavior, including giving choices to your child

Step 1 can be repeated several times.

- **Step 2: Providing a Warning of a Consequence:** Give your child a warning of a specific consequence that will happen the next time the limit or rule is broken and your child engages in the inappropriate behavior again. Step 2 is not repeated.
- **Step 3: Enforcing the Consequence:** If the inappropriate behavior happens again after the warning has been given in Step 2, you will enforce the consequence immediately.

Setting limits with children can be challenging because emotions can escalate quickly when limits need to be set. I found the above limit-setting protocol to be very effective in helping children understand the limits and learn to take responsibility for their behaviors.

# Chapter 6:

## Step-by-Step Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime

Now that you are familiar with practicing the Child-Directed Playtime Skills individually, it is time to put it all together and use these skills in a playtime setting.

### Things to Consider Ahead of Playtime

#### Age range

Child-Directed Playtime is most appropriate for children ages three to ten years old; however, this approach can be used with modifications for older or younger children by adapting the parenting skills used and the play environment to make things more age-appropriate. Please remember that toys used for children three years and older are not appropriate for children under three years old.

#### Time available

You can engage in Child-Directed Playtime basically any time you have a few minutes of free time, ideally when you have no other distractions. Short playtimes can be very effective. Parent-child playtimes do not need to last for hours at a time! Sometimes five, ten, or fifteen minutes of playtime with your

child can be achieved easier than devoting an hour trying to focus specifically on playing with your child.

It is important to be regular and consistent with your playtimes. Some parents find frequent, shorter playtimes more convenient. Other parents prefer to have longer but less frequent playtimes. At a minimum, try to have one thirty-minute playtime once per week.

Parent-child play is about having fun together, creating positive feelings, and just enjoying each other's company. It's best not to feel frustrated, exhausted, resentful, or angry when playing with your child because your child can easily sense these uncomfortable feelings in you, which in turn creates uncomfortable feelings in your child. At the same time, though, don't beat yourself up and feel guilty if it is not the right time to play together with your child right now.



*Here's something important for you to remember:*

*Parents do not need to play the entire day with their children! These days, parents seem to be expected to integrate play into all aspects of everyday life, which is really an impossible task. We all try to be playful with our children and positive throughout the day, but that does not mean playing with your child nonstop.*



If it is not convenient for you to play or you are distracted with other things, you can say “no” to your child’s request to play together by saying something like, “I can’t play with you right now.” Acknowledge your child's disappointment by saying, "I can see you're disappointed we can't play right now." Identify a time to play that would work better for you, for example, “I will have some time to play with you later after I put the laundry in the washer and clean up the kitchen.”

You can direct your child to some other activity by saying something like, “Here are some stickers for you to decorate this page with” or “See how many cotton balls you can throw in the basket when you stand here; then you can make it harder by standing back further.” With this strategy, you are trying to engage your child in an activity that does not involve you.

Another idea is to include your child in household chores by making the activities fun and playful. For example, you can make a game out of tidying up a room by seeing if it can get done within a time limit.

.....

*Please see Chapter 13, Generalizing Playtime Skills to Real Life, for details on using the Engagement Skill to involve your child in household chores.*

.....

And please don't forget to remind yourself that although now is not the right time to play together, you will have other opportunities to play with your child when it would work better. Then plan a time for later to play with your child, even if it is only for five or ten minutes.

.....

*Here's something I think you might be interested in:*

*All children need their parent's undivided and focused attention at times. Dr. Garry Landreth, an internationally recognized expert for his writings and work with children, recommends a "thirty-second burst of attention" (Landreth & Bratton, 2006, pp. 141-142). When your child demands your attention, you can choose, at times, to focus your undivided attention on your child for thirty seconds, listening or watching attentively to "what your child is saying or showing you, as if that is most important in all the world to you at that moment (p. 142)." When thirty seconds is finished, thank your child for showing or telling you whatever it is they did, then let your child know you need to go back to whatever you are doing. I love this activity! Although the thirty seconds of focused attention may not technically be considered playtime, focused attention from parents is a foundation for any parent-child play activity. Even if you are busy with other things, taking thirty seconds away from what you are doing is generally fairly manageable. Of course, you would never do this if it is not safe to provide your undivided attention to your child, such as when you are driving or cooking!*

.....

### **No distractions**

Another thing to consider when you set aside time for playtime is that, ideally, parents need to devote one hundred percent of their attention to

their child for that specific period of time. There should be no distractions or interruptions, such as phones, computers, TVs, school or work activities, or household chores, for you or your child. Phones, computers, and other electronics should be shut off. Work, volunteer, and housework activities should be put aside for the time allotted for your playtime.

### **One parent/one child**

Child-Directed Playtime works best if you and your child are able to play one-to-one with no other children or adults around. This can often be very challenging with more than one child in the household. I can understand this situation completely after having three children myself! However, I highly recommend that each child in a family get some one-to-one playtime with each parent.

What can you do when there is more than one child in the family? This may mean organizing a particular time when the other child is or children are being cared for by others. Additionally, if your child is old enough, they may be able to play independently, but within your direct supervision, for a short period of time while you are engaged in one-to-one play with your other child. You can emphasize the concept of taking turns playing one-to-one with you and playing independently.

You can have playtime with more than one child at a time, although it is more difficult for you and less effective for your child. With practice though, playing with more than one child using the Child-Directed Playtime skills is certainly possible.

### **Play area and toys**

Think ahead about where you will have your playtime since the play space and toys need to be safe, child-friendly, and age-appropriate. Your child may already be in an appropriate area to play in when you initiate playtime. That's great; just stay where you are. However, if they are not in an appropriate area for play, take them to the appropriate spot before starting the play activity.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 7 for details on setting up a play area and the appropriate toys for Child-Directed Playtime.*  
.....

## Indicating Start and End Time

Indicating the start and end of playtime is important because it provides some structure and indicates that this is a unique and special time for you and your child, distinguishing it from other times in your child's life. I remember it was very helpful when I was playing with children as a play therapist to provide some basic structure by identifying to them a start and end to the playtime.

It can be helpful to decide on how much time you have available to spend playing with your child so you can indicate at the beginning how long you are able to play together. For example:

- The parent approaches the child and says, "I have fifteen minutes to play now. Let's go to your room." When you and your child get to the play area, you would begin the playtime.
- The child is in an appropriate play area; the parent says, "We can play together for ten minutes now."

Even though young children don't yet properly understand how time passes, putting a time limit on playtime is a fantastic way to help your child learn about this concept. Putting a time limit on playtime also creates some structure to the playtime so that your child begins to learn about limits and you don't feel frustrated and powerless when the playtime seems to go on and on and on!

You do not necessarily have to give your child an indication of exactly how long you have to play. For example, you can say something like:

- "I have some time to play with you now."
- "We can play together for a while now."



*Here's an interesting point:*

*Even if parents make time to play with their children, sometimes children do not want to engage in play with their parents right then! Maybe their child is busy with something or playing independently at that moment. The advantage with Child-Directed Playtime is that parents can still engage in whatever their children are doing by putting themselves in a Nondirective Role and using the Empathic Skills.*



It is important to give your child a warning, either five minutes and/or one minute, prior to ending playtime:

- “We have five more minutes/one more minute for our playtime today.”
- “We’re almost out of time. We have five more minutes/one more minute to play. Then we have to stop playing.”

Finally, let your child know that playtime has finished by saying something like:

- “Our playtime is done for now.”
- “Time to stop playing together now.”

.....  
*Please see the section below on Ending Playtime for more examples and ideas.*  
.....

## Positioning Yourself

Once you and your child are in a suitable play area, you would position yourself appropriately. During playtime, your child needs to feel you are interested and attentive, so you would position yourself by getting down to your child’s level, close enough so that you can see what they are doing, but not so close as to be intrusive. This may mean you are on the floor or are sitting on a stool, or you may be sitting beside or across from each other on the floor or at a table. During playtime, you would follow your child around the play area, again, staying on the same level and being close to your child, but not intrusively so. With more active or role-playing games, keep an appropriate distance, but maintain your focus on your child.

.....  
*Here’s an important point:*  
*Don’t get sidetracked and let your attention wander to yourself, the toys, or the game being played. One of your main jobs during playtime is to watch your child closely, observing their face, body*

*movements and actions, and even making eye contact, so you can understand what they are experiencing during the play.*



## Initiating Child-Directed Playtime

With Child-Directed Playtime, an important thing to remember at the start of playtime is to invite your child to lead the play—that is, to choose or decide on the toys to be played with and/or activities to be played. Basically, you are giving your child permission to take charge in the play. After you have indicated that playtime is starting, and when you and your child are in the appropriate play area, you would say something like:

- “You can choose what to play today.”
- “You get to decide what we should play with today.”
- “You can choose how to play in just about any way you want.”

### **Examples:**

- The parent indicates they are free and have time to play by saying, “I have ten minutes to play now. Let’s go to your room.” When the parent and child get to the child’s room, the parent would invite the child to lead the play by saying something like, “You can decide what to play with today.”
- The child runs up to the parent and asks the parent to play. If the parent has time available and they are in an appropriate play area, the parent would say, “Okay, we can play together now for fifteen minutes. You can choose what to play.”

## Engaging in Child-Directed Playtime

Now the fun begins! You have:

- Ensured you and your child are in a suitable play area
- Indicated to your child that you have some time to play together
- Positioned yourself appropriately
- Invited your child to lead the play



And your child has started playing! Let the playtime begin!



*Please see the Independence Skill in Chapter 4 if your child is having problems choosing what to do.*



Here is a summary of how to engage in Child-Directed Playtime:

- Get into a Nondirective Role by using the Nondirective Role Skills (Empathic and Autonomy Skills)
- Temporarily get into a Directive Role and:
  - Use the Limit-Setting Skill if your child engages in unsafe or destructive behaviors, then return to a Nondirective Role
  - Use the Play Structuring Skills to briefly support your child if they struggle excessively with something, then return to a Nondirective Role

## Get into a Nondirective Role

Put yourself into a Nondirective Role and use the Nondirective Role Skills (Empathic and Autonomy Skills) as follows:

### Empathic Skills

- The Describing Skill: Describe your child's actions using objective Describing Statements.
- The Feelings Identification Skill: When you notice a feeling that is coming up for your child, or you notice something your child is experiencing, identify the feeling you notice or what you notice your child experiencing using a Feelings Identification Statement.
- The Paraphrasing Skill: When your child is telling you about something, paraphrase back to your child what they have told you.
- The Encouragement Skill: When you notice your child is working, or has worked, hard on something, encourage your child by focusing on their efforts and strengths. Don't praise your child.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the Empathic Skills.*  
.....

**Autonomy Skills**

- The Independence Skill: Allow your child to lead and direct the playtime. Don't tell you child what to do or not do. Don't advise or correct your child. Don't ask questions to your child. Give your child opportunities to make choices and decisions and to problem solve.
- The Following Directions Skill: Wait for your child to initiate an invitation for you to join in play and then play the way your child wants you to play. Follow your child's directions as long as play remains safe and non-destructive.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 4 for a detailed discussion of the Autonomy Skills.*  
.....

**Switch temporarily to a Directive Role as needed**

- When your child engages in, or starts to engage in, unsafe or destructive behaviors, switch temporarily to a Directive Role and use the Limit-Setting Skill to limit the behaviors, then return to a Nondirective Role.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the Limit-Setting Skill.*  
.....

- Refrain from “jumping in” to provide answers or support your child. However, if your child continues to struggle after you have remained in a Nondirective Role for a period of time and is getting overly frustrated or anxious, switch temporarily to a Directive Role, use the

Play Structuring Skills to support your child briefly, then return to a Nondirective Role.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion of the Play Structuring Skills.*  
.....

## Are you actually being nondirective?

VanFleet et al. (2010, p. 86) have developed a checklist for play therapists to determine if they are really being nondirective with their child clients. Using and adapting some of the points from their checklist, here's a quick way to determine if you are staying in a Nondirective Role or if you are drifting towards being in a Directive Role.

When you are in a Nondirective Role allowing your child to lead and direct the play, as long as the play is safe and non-destructive, notice whenever you want to:

- Guide or teach your child something
- Tell your child what to do
- Relieve your child's struggles by providing suggestions or ideas to your child rather than giving your child time to problem solve
- Ask questions to your child to find out a little more information about what's going on in the play
- Let your child know how much you like what they are doing
- Do things a bit more quickly for your child
- Change something in how your child is structuring the play
- Reassure or calm your child when they are feeling angry, worried, or sad, but things are remaining safe and non-destructive

If you notice any of the above, you may be moving towards being in a Directive Role, where you are structuring some aspect of the play. This is not necessarily a bad thing and may be what you are aiming to do. The important point here is that you consciously make the decision to remain

in a Nondirective Role for Child-Directed Playtime, or move out of a Nondirective Role and into a Directive Role for Parent-Directed Playtime.

## Ending Child-Directed Playtime

### Give warnings for ending playtime

As mentioned above, it is important to give a five-minute and/or a one-minute warning before the end of playtime. At the appropriate time, you would say something like:

- “We have five more minutes/one more minute for our playtime.”

### State the end of playtime

At the end of your playtime, tell your child that playtime between you is finished by saying something like:

- “Our playtime is finished now. Time to stop playing.”
- “Time to stop playing together now. We can play again another time.”

### Resistance to ending

There may be some resistance from your child as you end the playtime, but try to keep more or less to the specified time that you have initially set for the playtime (that is, if you have specified a duration for playtime) and end the session without significant delays. This can be challenging for parents (I certainly found it challenging at times to end playtime!), but ending the playtime without too much delay is helpful for your child in being able to experience and manage feelings of frustration and disappointment.

If your child is very resistant, you can say something like:

- “I can see you are unhappy to end our playtime, but we need to stop playing now. We can have another playtime soon/tomorrow.”

## Options After Ending Playtime

You have several choices on what to do next after telling your child that the playtime has ended:

- One option is for you to move on to doing something else, such as preparing dinner or writing an email, allowing your child to continue playing on their own. This may mean ignoring angry complaints by your child and moving on yourself.
- Another option would be to have something else scheduled for your child after your playtime, for example, getting a snack or doing another activity. Again, be prepared for resistance from your child and do your best to ignore the complaints and to carry on with your proposed activity.
- Another option is to start tidying up the play area yourself. Your child may spontaneously join in to help clean up, and that is just fine.
- Finally, you could get your child to help you clean up at the end of playtime. You may want to devise some type of ending/clean-up activity that playfully involves your child. However, if there is a lot of resistance from your child in helping you clean up, you may not want to engage in a power struggle with your child by demanding that they help you clean up. The goal of Child-Directed Playtime is for your child to connect in a positive way with you and to experience positive feelings throughout the playtime, and that includes ending the playtime. Outside of Child-Directed Playtime, getting your child to clean up and put toys away is totally appropriate and it is a necessary skill to teach your child. However, ending Child-Directed Playtime is a special situation in which you may want to relax your normal demands for having your child clean up. To get the full benefit of Child-Directed Playtime, you would not demand that your child clean up the play area afterwards.

**Congratulations!** You have just engaged in Child-Directed Playtime with your child! Here are some questions to reflect on:

- How easy or difficult was it for your child to engage in Child-Directed Playtime with you?
- Did your child have trouble deciding what to play?
- Did your child struggle with challenging tasks? How did you respond?

- Did you notice your child giving you many directions for you to follow? How did it feel following your child's directions?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to end the playtime? What option worked best for you for ending playtime?
- What was the most challenging part about the playtime for you?
- What did you like best about Child-Directed Playtime?

It is a good idea to keep track initially of the times you engaged in Child-Directed Playtime with your child and note the following:

- How long did the playtime last?
- What were the main play activities you and your child engaged in?
- Anything important that you noticed or reflected upon?
- Things you will plan or not plan to do for your next playtime?



*You might find this of interest:*

*I am particularly drawn to Child-Directed Playtime. Over many years working with parents and children as a play therapist, I came to understand that most parents did not understand the rationale behind a child-directed approach to play with their child and would often dismiss this style as unimportant and insignificant. However, I know from my own experiences that facilitating a child-directed style of play is an enormously powerful way to connect with and understand children.*



## Examples of Child-Directed Playtime

### Example #1: Beds for princesses

Here's an example of what Child-Directed Playtime might look like when you stay in a Nondirective Role for the entire playtime and do not need to switch temporarily to a Directive Role to guide or limit your child:

- You have just taken your child to a suitable play area, indicated you have some time now to play together, invited your child to choose the

play activity, positioned yourself appropriately, and put yourself into a Nondirective Role.

- Your child looks at the toys briefly and then decides on playing with the Lego. She takes the box of Lego off the shelf and puts it on the floor, sits down beside it, and begins to put some Lego blocks together.
- You start by using the Describing Skill to describe what your child is doing, saying, “Looks like you’ve decided to make something with Lego.”
- Your child continues to put Lego blocks together without acknowledging you.
- You continue to use the Describing Skill to describe what your child is doing, saying, “Ahh, I see, you’re putting those two pieces together . . . Oh, now you’ve added that special piece . . . and you’re putting some yellow pieces on now.”
- Your child continues to put pieces together. Using the Independence Skill, you allow your child opportunities to do things her way. You resist stepping in to suggest things or help her and you also refrain from asking questions.
- You notice your child begins to struggle putting two blocks together that stubbornly refuse to fit. You use the Feelings Identification Skill to acknowledge your child’s struggle and say, “It feels frustrating when they don’t fit together.”
- You use the Encouragement Skill to support your child by acknowledging her efforts, saying, “You’re working really hard on that. You just about got it.” You refrain from praising your child.
- Your child gets the Lego pieces together the way she wants and says to you, “These two pieces have to go together first. Now I can put the blue piece on over here.”
- You use the Paraphrasing Skill and say, “Oh I see, you needed to put those two pieces together first before you put the blue piece on.”

- Your child tells you a bit more about what she is doing, saying, “This is going to be a bed for my princess. And her bedroom is right here (indicating a box for the bedroom).”
- You would use the Paraphrasing Skill and say, “Okay, so your princess will sleep in her bed in her bedroom right there.”
- Your child finishes building the Lego bed, finds a scrap of fabric to use as a blanket, and puts the bed and blanket carefully in the box.
- You notice your child looking very satisfied. You use the Feelings Identification Skill and say, “You’re feeling happy with the princess’s bedroom.”
- You use the Encouragement Skill to acknowledge your child’s efforts instead of praising her and say, “You did it just the way you wanted.”
- Your child then invites you to do a task, saying, “Can you make a bed for her sister?”
- You, using the Following Directions Skill, say “Okay,” and start putting together some Lego blocks to make another bed the way you think your child would want.
- Your child corrects what you are doing, saying, “Use the green blocks for her bed.”
- You say “Okay” and proceed to use the green blocks. You ask for directions from your child about what to do with the bed when you are done by saying, “Where should the bed go?”
- Your child tells you to put it in the box beside the other bed she has previously made and you proceed to follow directions.
- Your child then goes to get her two princess dolls and invites you to participate in imaginary play by saying, “You be the blue princess and I’ll be the pink princess.”
- You use the Following Directions Skill and take hold of the blue princess and start to role-play this character in the way you think your child would want. You say, “Oh, I’m really tired, I think I will lie down in my nice comfy bed here” and you put the princess into her bed.



- Your child takes over the role of the pink princess.
- You let your child direct how the imaginary story unfolds. You play the part of the blue princess in the way that your child directs you. As long as your child remains interested in this imaginary play scenario, you continue in your role and play the way your child directs you.
- You give a warning at five minutes left, and then at one minute left before the end of the playtime. At the end of the playtime, you say, “Time to stop playing now. We can have another playtime again soon.”

### **Example #2: Pool noodle fun**

Here’s an example of what Child-Directed Playtime might look like when you need to “jump in” to a Directive Role to limit unsafe behavior:

- You and your child are engaged in Child-Directed Playtime. You are in a Nondirective Role. Your child has made up a game for the two of you to play. He has given you a pool noodle and has told you that if you can touch him with the noodle, you get a point, and if he can touch you with the noodle, he will get a point.
- You use the Following Directions Skill and try to touch him on his body with the noodle. You play the way that you think he wants you to play: not too competitively, but enough to make the game fun.
- You let your child make up the rules and follow what he says. However, you are noticing that your child is getting close to poking you in the face.
- You switch from a Nondirective Role to a Directive Role because you want to set a limit around poking in the face. You use Step 1 of the Limit-Setting Skill and say, “Whoa! Time out! We have to keep things safe, so the rule is no touching or poking above the neck. Okay, game on!”
- You switch back into a Nondirective Role and continue playing using the Following Directions Skill. Your child respects the limit initially, but then gets close to hitting your face, so you switch into a Directive Role and repeat Step 1 of the Limit-Setting Skill and

remind him to not touch you above the neck. Then you switch back into a Nondirective Role and continue to play, using the Following Directions Skill to let your child direct you on how he wants you to play.

- Ideally, your child will respect the limit. However, if he starts to get close to touching your face again, you would switch into a Directive Role and move on to Step 2 of the Limit-Setting Skill and say, “Remember I told you no touching above the neck. If you touch me above the neck again, we will have to end this game for today.” Then you switch back into a Nondirective Role and use the Following Directions Skill to continue to play the way he directs you.
- If your child touches you one more time on the face, you would switch into a Directive Role and move on to Step 3 of the Limit-Setting Skill and say, “Ouch, that hurt. Remember, I said if you touch me in the face we need to stop the game for today. Since you chose to touch me in the face, we will need to stop playing right now.” Then you put down the noodle and discontinue the play.

### **Example #3: Helicopter hassles**

Here’s an example of what Child-Directed Playtime might look like when you notice your child is continuing to struggle with something after you have given your child ample opportunities to make choices and decisions and to problem solve. You “jump in” to a Directive Role and use the Play Structuring Skills to support and guide your child just enough so you can “back off” again to a Nondirective Role and continue to play:

- You and your child are engaging in Child-Directed Playtime and your child has found a toy to play with that is fairly new for her. It is a helicopter with some accessories, including a rescue net. Your child is very interested in this toy and is examining it closely. She takes out the rescue net and asks you, “What’s this?”
- You are in a Nondirective Role using the Independence Skill and are not telling your child what to do and not making any suggestions on how to use the toy. Instead, you acknowledge her curiosity by using the Feelings Identification Skill, saying, “You’re feeling really curious about that.” Then you give your child some time to examine the toy.

- Your child puts the net down, looks at the helicopter closely, and manipulates the moving parts. Using the Independence Skill, you are allowing your child a chance to look at the toy and figure it out, not asking her any questions or telling her what things are for. Again you are acknowledging her interest by using the Describing Skill and saying, “You’re really having a good look at that helicopter, seeing how it might work.”
- Your child continues exploring the helicopter and starts to attach some of the accessories. Again using the Independence Skill, you are allowing your child freedom to explore and decide how to attach the things in her own way. You continue to refrain from asking questions or directing your child in any way. Again, you are using the Describing Skill and acknowledging your child’s focus by saying, “Looks like you’re trying to get that net on the hook.”
- You notice your child is starting to struggle in putting the rescue net onto the helicopter hook. Using the Independence Skill, you are still allowing your child a chance to problem solve and do things on her own. Instead of telling your child what to do, you use the Encouragement Skill and say, “It’s really tricky getting that net onto the hook, but you’re trying really hard.”
- Your child keeps trying to get the net onto the hook, but it is just too difficult for her and you notice she is getting frustrated, so you decide to step into a Directive Role and use the Engagement Skill to guide and support your child. You say, “Here, I’ll show you the best spot on the net to hook onto the helicopter.” Then you show your child how to hook the net onto the helicopter, and as soon as it is on, you give the helicopter to your child and switch back into a Nondirective Role and let your child continue with the playtime.

## Other Ways to Engage in Child-Directed Playtime

There are several other ways you can engage in Child-Directed Playtime with your child other than by initiating playtime yourself:

- Your child asks you to play and you structure it as Child-Directed Playtime.
- Your child is already playing and you join your child and structure it as Child-Directed Playtime.
- You switch from Parent-Directed Playtime to Child-Directed Playtime.
- You choose to engage in a more formal approach to Child-Directed Playtime.

### **Your child initiates play and you structure it as Child-Directed Playtime**

One way for you to engage in Child-Directed Playtime would be when your child asks you to play and you set up the playtime as Child-Directed Playtime:

- Your child runs up to you and asks you to play. If you and your child are not in an appropriate play area, you would say, “Okay, we can play together now for fifteen minutes. Let’s go to your room (or another appropriate play area).”
- When you and your child get to your child’s room, you would position yourself appropriately and invite your child to lead the play by saying something like, “You get to choose what to play.”
- You would then start to use the Nondirective Role Skills.

### **Your child is already playing and you join your child**

You may also initiate Child-Directed Playtime with your child whenever you notice your child is already playing. To start this way, you approach your child, position yourself appropriately, and then start using the Nondirective Role Skills. In this case, you do not need to specifically invite your child to choose what to play because your child is already engaged in playing!

- You notice your child playing in her room with her cars and decide to engage in Child-Directed Playtime with her.
- You would position yourself appropriately and start using the Nondirective Role Skills, for example, the Describing Skill, by saying, “Looks like you are lining up your cars.”

- You would continue using the Nondirective Role Skills throughout the playtime.

## Switching from Parent-Directed Playtime to Child-Directed Playtime

Sometimes, you may initiate play in a fairly directive and structured manner, perhaps starting with Parent-Directed Playtime, in order to engage your child in play. Once you have initiated the playtime this way and your child is engaging in the play activity, you then have the option to switch to Child-Directed Playtime and let your child lead the play. To switch to Child-Directed Playtime, you would invite your child to choose what to do or play with next and then continue the playtime in a Nondirective Role using the Nondirective Role Skills.

- You have started the playtime as Parent-Directed Playtime by using the Engagement Skill and directing your child to help build a marble run together. Your child has engaged well and he is willingly and happily building the marble run with you.
- Once the marble run structure is complete, you decide to switch from Parent-Directed Playtime to Child-Directed Playtime. You would switch from being in a Directive Role to being in a Nondirective Role and invite your child to take over the play by saying something like, “We did it! Now you can play with it in just about any way you want.”
- You would then use the Nondirective Role Skills.



*Please see Chapter 12 where the Advanced Playtime Switch-or-Stay Skill is discussed in more detail.*



## A Formal Approach: Child-Directed “Special Playtime”

Finally, parents may choose to use a more formal approach to Child-Directed Playtime. The formal approach has more stringent guidelines and requirements for having a child-directed, one-to-one, thirty-minute play session with your child consistently once per week for a number of weeks.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, in my professional career as a play therapist, I used a particular play therapy approach (Filial or Child-Parent Relationship Therapy) that includes, as part of the child's therapy, parents having their own play sessions at home with their children. Many of the guidelines I developed for Child-Directed Playtime have been adapted from these approaches and modified so that parents would be able to fit even a short playtime in whenever it was convenient. I wanted to encourage parents to use the Nondirective Role Skills in many interactions with their children on a regular and consistent basis, even if the interactions were short and lasted only five to ten minutes.

The actual recommended guidelines for the parent-child playtime at home taken from the play therapy approaches mentioned above are stricter and more comprehensive and may be difficult for some parents to follow completely. However, I wanted to include these more formal guidelines so that parents could have a choice as to whether to follow them or use the less formal approach as outlined above. I have called this more formal approach Child-Directed Special Playtime or just "Special Playtime" for short.

Special Playtime is done **one-to-one between one parent and one child**, so that means other children in the family should be engaged in some other activity either on their own or with the other parent or another adult.

A Special Playtime session will be **thirty minutes in length** and should take place **once per week**. Special Playtime should be scheduled ahead of time so you and your child can plan around it, and it should be scheduled for a time that is agreeable and convenient for both you and your child.

You should be consistent about providing Special Playtime sessions to your child. This approach requires regularity and consistency. Weekly Special Playtime sessions once a week for **eight to twelve weeks** at a minimum should be undertaken.

Special Playtime should be set up so that there are **no distractions or interruptions for both you and your child**, such as other adults or children, pets, phones, computers, TV, school or work activities, or household chores.

For Special Playtime, the parent would ensure the **play area is organized and set up** ahead of time.

It is a good idea to **distinguish Special Playtime** from other times in your child's life. Some parents will identify this playtime as "Special Playtime" or

“Special Time.” You may have other ideas for unique names for your Special Playtime. Here is an example of introducing it to your child:

- “Later this afternoon, we are going to do something fun together. We will have thirty minutes to play together, just you and me. You can choose what to play with. This will be our Special Playtime. I will let you know when it is time to start our Special Playtime.”

To start, you would indicate to your child that it is **time to start** Special Playtime (“Time for our Special Playtime!”) and you would bring your child to the already-set-up play area. Then you would invite your child to lead the play. To initiate the play, you would say something like:

- “Now we can start our Special Playtime. We have thirty minutes to play together, just you and me. For Special Playtime, you get to decide what to play with.”

For the next thirty minutes, you would engage in Child-Directed Playtime **using the Nondirective Role Skills:**

- The Describing Skill
- The Feelings Identification Skill
- The Paraphrasing Skill
- The Encouragement Skill
- The Independence Skill
- The Following Directions Skill

If you have given your child opportunities to lead the play, make choices and decisions, and manage tasks and your child continues to struggle with making a choice or doing something, **switch temporarily to a Directive Role** to support your child, then return to a Nondirective Role.

If your child engages in, or starts to engage in, unsafe or destructive behaviors, **switch temporarily to a Directive Role** to limit the behaviors using the Limit-Setting Skill, then return to a Nondirective Role.

During Special Playtime, parents and children aim to **remain in the play area that has been set up** for the playtime. This means that the play area itself must be inviting and stimulating for your child. If your child decides to

go to a different area, this would be an appropriate time for using the Limit-Setting Skill by saying something like:

- “This is our Special Playtime, and for Special Playtime, we stay in this play area. You can play somewhere else when we are done our Special Playtime, but for now we are staying here.”

Remember, it is important to give a five-minute and a one-minute **warning before the end of the playtime.**

- “We have five more minutes/one more minute for our playtime.”

At the end of thirty minutes, tell your child that this is **the end of your Special Playtime for today** and that just the two of you will have a Special Playtime another time. You would say something like:

- “Our Special Playtime is finished for today. Time to stop playing together now. We can have another Special Playtime, just you and me, next week.”

For Special Playtime, **you would not ask your child to clean up the play area.** This is a job for you to do. If your child wants to join in and help, that’s fine, but please don’t demand that your child help you clean up after the end of Special Playtime.

Don’t forget to **schedule your next Special Playtime for the following week!**

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we looked at how to hold a Child-Directed Playtime session with your child. First of all, there are a few things that need to be considered ahead of time, such as choosing an appropriate time and making sure the play area is set up appropriately.

For Child-Directed Playtime, after you indicate that the playtime is starting, you invite your child to choose the play activities. This gives your child permission to take the lead in the playtime and direct the play activities. You then position yourself appropriately and put yourself into a Nondirective Role using the Empathic and Autonomy Skills to connect with your child. The key points to remember are:

- No directions or suggestions to your child



- No questions asked
- Use the Empathic Skills to show you are interested in and understand your child
- Follow your child's directions
- Use encouragement instead of praise
- Use the Limit-Setting Skill to prevent unsafe or destructive behaviors

Do not step into a Directive Role right away. If your child is struggling with something, however, you may very briefly step into a Directive Role and use the Play Structuring Skills to support your child just enough so they can continue on with the play activity. Then you would return to a Nondirective Role.

For Child-Directed Playtime, you give warnings for the end of playtime, then you indicate when it is time to stop playing and end the playtime without significant delays. To get the full benefit of Child-Directed Playtime, you would not demand that your child clean up the play area afterwards.

There are several ways to engage in Child-Directed Playtime more informally. You can also engage in Child-Directed Playtime using a more formal protocol that has more stringent requirements in order to fully access the benefits of this style of parent-child play.

# Chapter 7:

## The Play Area and Toys for Child-Directed Playtime

### The Play Area for Child-Directed Playtime

The play area for Child-Directed Playtime needs to be child-friendly and safe and ideally should have a variety of age-appropriate toys for your child to choose from. There should also be a clear area to allow for setting up the toys or to allow your child to move around freely to some extent. A space for drawing, art, or Play-doh is important, such as a table or a hard, flat surface on the floor. The art materials, such as paper, pens, crayons, pencils, etc., should be made available near the drawing area. You may want to provide a “messy” play area for painting, sand, water, and Play-doh by placing a plastic tablecloth on the floor or a table.

Within the play area, the toys and play items should be freely and easily available and accessible to your child. For younger children, this may mean setting the toys on the floor or on low shelves that are accessible to them. For older children, toys can be put higher, but still need to be easily reached. Ideally, the toys and play items should be somewhat organized into groups. Boxes or baskets are useful for organizing these things.

### Toys for Child-Directed Playtime

Toys for Child-Directed Playtime should be able to be used in many different ways by children to encourage creativity and imagination. The toys do not

need to be elaborate or fancy; children have used sticks and stones as toys since early times! Toys should be safe, age-appropriate, uncomplicated, and easily handled to avoid frustration.

Toys that have specific instructions or directions that need to be followed need to be used with care for Child-Directed Playtime. With Child-Directed Playtime, children will be encouraged to make independent decisions on what to play with and how to play with what they have chosen. Guidance from parents on how to play with a toy or do an activity is reserved for Parent-Directed Playtime.

Often children like to represent their family members in play and play out family situations, whether it is with people, animals, or even cars or inanimate objects. Children also like to practice behaviors they have observed or replay situations or experiences that have happened to them in the real world.

The following list of toys is only a guideline for toys that would be appropriate for Child-Directed Playtime. You certainly do NOT need all the toys mentioned below; however, it can be very helpful for parents to keep these categories in mind when considering toys, as it is good to include a few items from each category in your toy setup. Remember also that some categories of toys may be more attractive to your child than other categories, especially during different stages of development.

You may already have many of the categories of toys outlined below. If you are wanting to supplement your toys, flea markets, garage sales, and thrift stores are good places to find toys. Also, many parents have made toys out of old boxes. For example, a dollhouse or fort can be made out of a box by outlining the rooms on the bottom of the box. A toy stove and refrigerator can also be made from cardboard boxes. Puppets can be made out of old socks. Children find empty food containers, which can be used in many different ways, very entertaining.

If you want, you can collect and put aside a set of toys that you bring out just for Child-Directed Playtime. Some parents find this helps to engage their child in the playtime because the toys are novel and not used in everyday play. However, it is not a requirement that you use novel toys for Child-Directed Playtime.

.....  
***Please remember!***

***It is NOT the number of toys you have that is important. As the parent, YOU are the most important toy for your child!***  
.....

The following list of toys is appropriate for children between three and ten years old and is only a guideline for toys that could be used in Child-Directed Playtime. Please remember that toys suitable for children three years and over are not suitable for children under three years old.

### **Small or miniature people**

This category would include small human or human-like characters such as plastic/metal/wooden figures (Note: Playmobil, Duplo, or Lego people are popular with children and work well in this category), dolls, stuffed toys, puppets, etc. You can include:

- People representing families (adults, adolescents, children, babies, grandparents)
- People from different time periods (knights, pirates, princes and princesses, kings and queens, futuristic space explorers)
- People doing different jobs or activities (doctors, teachers, farmers, construction workers, police, paramedics, soldiers, astronauts)
- Fantasy people or characters (superheroes, aliens, robots, monsters, cartoon characters)
- People from different cultures and countries

### **Small or miniature animals**

Similar to the people category, this category would include different sizes of plastic/metal/wooden figures, stuffed toys, or puppets that represent:

- Domestic animals, pets, wild animals, zoo animals, sea creatures, insects, birds, reptiles, etc.
- Dinosaurs, dragons, and other non-existent creatures

## **Small or miniature vehicles**

Examples of this category include:

- Cars, trucks, boats, airplanes, helicopters, motorcycles, trains, buses, construction vehicles, spaceships, etc.
- Police cars, fire trucks, ambulances, and other emergency or rescue vehicles

## **Buildings or shelters for miniature people, animals, or vehicles**

This category could include any type of building or shelter for the above miniature figures. For example:

- A house, castle, hospital, school, store, barn, zoo, fort, garage, fire or police station, tent, office, etc.
- Things that could supplement the shelter such as furniture, fences, ladders, trees, plants, rocks, treasure and treasure boxes, or a car wash

## **Real-life toys**

These toys will represent real-life situations, including the following:

- Shopping items (such as cash registers, play money, purses or wallets, shopping bags, or baskets)
- Play kitchen items (such as play food, pots and pans, a stove, sink, refrigerator, dishes, or cutlery)
- Other toy household items (such as phones, keys, computers, brooms, vacuums, or tools)
- Toy medical kits (including medical items, Band-Aids, sling, etc.)
- Life-size baby dolls and baby beds, baby bottles, baby dishes, potty, baby clothes, diapers, and blankets
- Dolls and doll clothes

## **Dress-up items**

This category would include:

- Costumes, old clothes, hats, gloves, shoes, boots, scarves, etc.
- Props such as backpacks, jewellery, masks, wallets, purses, or foam pirate swords

## Active play items

This category could include:

- Regular or soft foam balls
- Foam swords, bats, sticks, or pool noodles
- Ring or bean bag toss
- Skipping ropes
- Indoor bowling set
- Indoor basketball hoop
- Velcro target games
- Pillows or cushions

Other items that will encourage movement for self-regulation include:

- Swings, rockers
- Fitness balls
- Fidget toys

## Sensory or “messy” play

“Messy” play is a type of sensorimotor play that would allow your child to get their hands messy, such as play in sand or water or with paint or Play-doh. These activities are important for children in developing self-regulation skills.

For indoor messy play, it is important to set up an area where this messy play can happen, such as on a plastic tablecloth laid on the floor or on a protected table. Set limits so that sand, water, paint, or Play-doh must stay within this area or else the messy play activity gets put away for the day. You may want to save messy play for when you have time to set up and clean up afterwards!

- **Sand play:** If you are able, a tray or container approximately 50 x 75 cm (20 x 30 inches) that would accommodate children's play sand about 5 cm (2 inches) deep (rice or beans are also an option) can be very fun and is an excellent option for sensorimotor play, which helps to develop a child's self-regulation capacities. Kinetic Sand is a product that is similar to regular sand and can also be very fun for children. Add a funnel, sieve, shovel, and pail. Also, add toys that are okay to be played with in sand (miniature people and animal figures; small cars, trucks, boats, planes; miniature trees and plants; small rocks, pebbles, decorative stones and sticks; etc.). Avoid having certain toys that are not allowed in the sand available or use the Limit-Setting Skill to restrict these toys from the sand play.
- **Water play:** If you want, a tray or container containing a limited amount of water (approx. 2-4 litres) can be provided. Again, this is wonderful for sensorimotor play. Add a funnel and containers for pouring and dumping, soap, sponges, washcloths, and small toys that can go in water. You would need to use the Limit-Setting Skill to keep the water contained to mostly in the container and to restrict water-resistant toys only to the water play. If you want, it can be fun to allow the mixing of sand and water with the proper instructions given to your child ("You can choose to mix the sand in the water or the water in the sand. Water and sand needs to stay in the containers or on the tablecloth.").
- **Paint:** Painting is a fun activity that most children love. Provide large pieces of paper and several colours of washable and non-toxic paint, paint brushes, and a container of water for rinsing the brushes. You may also want to provide a mixing bowl for mixing different colours of paint. You can put the paper on an easel, a bulletin board on a wall, or on any flat and firm surface that is protected. A plastic cover on the ground around the painting area is a good idea. Some children also love a finger painting area where they can get their hands covered in paint.
- **Modelling clay or Play-doh:** Provide different colours of clay or Play-doh and various items, such as shape cutters, rolling pins, toy

knives, and play scissors. Set aside some different colours of Play-doh that could be mixed together.

## **Toys for rhythm and music**

Children enjoy making noises! With Child-Directed Playtime, include musical or noisy instruments ONLY if you are prepared to allow your child to use these items freely without telling your child to be quiet.

Here are examples of things that would support rhythm and music:

- Recorded or live music
- Drums
- Xylophones
- Recorders, whistles
- Shakers and noise-makers
- Tambourines, triangles, bells

## **Basic art supplies**

Providing a variety of art materials for children to choose is important; it allows children to freely express themselves. Some examples of these materials would include:

- Paper of different sizes and colours, cardboard
- Crayons, markers, pencils, pens
- Empty boxes, egg cartons, empty food containers
- Safety scissors, glue, tape, string
- Stickers, straws, pipe cleaners, popsicle sticks
- Beads, wool, fabric, felt, wood
- Paints, Play-doh (see the section on messy play above)

## **Construction or building toys**

This category includes building toys or toys that can be put together such as:

- A set of wooden or foam blocks of different sizes and shapes



- Lego, Duplo, K'Nex, or other kinds of building sets
- Magnetic toys
- Marble runs
- Train tracks or roadways

## Miscellaneous

This would include anything that could be used in many different ways and that would enhance creativity, such as:

- Stones, sticks, shells, play gems or jewels, popsicle sticks, small boxes, miniature flowers, trees, fences, ladders, mountains/volcanoes, bridges, etc.

## What about games or activities with rules or instructions?

Toys or activities that have rules, instructions, or guidelines to follow in order to achieve a specific goal would include, for example, assembling a Lego structure according to directions, playing a board/card game by the rules, or following directions to complete a craft activity. Games or activities with rules or instructions need to be used with some modifications during Child-Directed Playtime.

Outside of Child-Directed Playtime, these toys, games, and activities with rules and directions can be very appropriate for parents and children to engage in together while the parent structures the playtime or takes on a more directive role to support the child in learning to follow directions or to master a task, as in Parent-Directed Playtime. With Child-Directed Playtime, however, your goal is NOT to teach or assist your child in mastering some task, but rather your job as a parent is to accept the choices your child is making in playing with the toy or doing the activity so that by using their creative and problem-solving abilities, your child develops skills for self-direction and independence.

In Child-Directed Playtime, if your child chooses to play with a game that has rules or instructions to follow, make sure that you are not directing your child in playing the game the way it is “supposed” to be done. Allow your child to make up the rules and follow your child’s directions on how

to play the game, even if their rules are completely opposite to the “real” rules. If your child questions you about the rules and how to play, you can respond by saying something like, “Today you can make up your own rules for the game.”

If your child chooses an activity that has instructions, for example, building a specific Lego structure or making a bead bracelet, and it is too frustrating for your child to do on their own or with a minimum of support from you, completing the activity according to the instructions should be saved for an activity to do outside of Child-Directed Playtime. However, if your child wants to do the activity during Child-Directed Playtime, be prepared to let your child do the activity their own way and resist telling your child how to do the activity or doing the activity yourself (“Looks like you want to make a bracelet. You can make it any way you want to.”). I remember how difficult this could be with my own children. As a parent, it was sometimes very difficult for me to resist completing the activity myself and to let my daughter do the activity her way, since it was much faster and easier for me to do the activity!

.....  
*Please see the Following Directions Skill in Chapter 4 if your child chooses to play with a game with rules or do an activity with instructions during Child-Directed Playtime.*  
.....

### **What about books?**

Books are generally not appropriate for Child-Directed Playtime and should be used sparingly. Some parents like to limit access to books by making them less available during Child-Directed Playtime. Although reading to a child is a highly recommended activity for parents, it should be done at times outside of Child-Directed Playtime. When a parent reads to a child, the parent takes over more of a directive or leading role. If a child decides to read on their own, although it is very good for developing a child’s interest in reading, it does not result in any interaction between the parent and child, which is one of the main goals of Child-Directed Playtime.

If a child chooses to read to their parent, this can be seen as a child-directed activity. In this case, parents would be in more of a listener role. To

keep this as Child-Directed Playtime, parents can stay in a Nondirective Role using the Empathic Skills to show they are attentive and interested in what their child is showing them and reading to them.

### **Electronic games, TV/videos or any type of screen activity**

These activities are not recommended for Child-Directed Playtime because they do not facilitate face-to-face interaction or the development of a connected relationship between parent and child. However, video games or any type of electronic screen activity can be popular with children. Children can be very enthusiastic in showing their parents their interests related to an electronic game or activity. Parents can stay in a Nondirective Role and use the Empathic Skills to connect with their children in these situations. One idea would be to set a time limit for your child around showing you their electronic game and then when time is up, redirect your child to a more appropriate interactive play activity.

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, we identified appropriate toys and play materials for Child-Directed Playtime. Basically, a variety of different toys that children can play with in different ways should be offered. Children should have free access to these toys in order to choose and engage in their desired play activity.

For Child-Directed Playtime, toys or activities with rules or instructions can be offered; however, the directions for these activities are not specifically followed, and parents will encourage their children to play with the toy in almost any way they would like, with no direction from the parent. Some activities are not encouraged in Child-Directed Playtime, such as reading to your child, teaching your child, having your child complete workbooks, or engaging in any type of activity that involves electronics or screens.

# Part III

## Guidelines for Parent-Directed Playtime

# Chapter 8:

## The Play Structuring Skills

I am excited to present to you in this chapter the details on using the skills that make Parent-Directed Playtime unique from Child-Directed Playtime. These are the Play Structuring Skills, and when using these skills, you will be putting yourself into a Directive Role and will be structuring the play activity according to your goals and the needs of your child as follows:

- The Engagement Skill: use to stimulate interactive engagement with your child
- The Regulating Skill: use to calm and regulate your child's nervous system

The objective of these two parental skills is to help your child develop and learn by **challenging, guiding, and supporting your child in the exploration and mastery of new skills that are important for their physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development.** There are a number of skills for children that can be developed in this kind of play:

- Physical skills include gross and fine motor skills, movement and coordination skills, imitation skills, and proprioceptive skills.
- Intellectual skills include observation, focus and attention, memory, following directions, strategic thinking, planning, problem-solving, imaginative, and creative skills

- Emotional skills include emotional intelligence, self-awareness, empathy, and self-regulation skills
- Social skills include skills for interaction, language and communication, cooperation and teamwork, playing fairly, following rules, and winning and losing

The wonderful news is that you can focus on any one of the above areas of development and encourage your child to explore, take risks, and enjoy the mastery of new situations and tasks through fun play activities. There is a virtually unlimited number of fun activities that will challenge and encourage your child to learn and develop their physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills.

## What are “Fun Activities”?

I have compiled a list of what I call “Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities” (or simply “Fun Activities”) that can be used with the Engagement and Regulating Skills. With these Fun Activities, you are engaging and regulating your child in play by giving them directions or instructions for playing some kind of interactive fun activity. These activities are specifically designed to encourage interactive engagement or emotional regulation depending on the specific activity chosen.



*Please go to the Appendix to view the list of Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities*



Most of these activities are common children’s activities that have been enjoyed by parents and children for many years. When I was working as a play therapist, I found that occupational therapist Barbara Sher, “The Games Lady,” was an excellent source of ideas for children’s games and activities (for example, see Sher, 1998; Sher, 2002; and Sher, 2004). Some other activities that I have included are adapted from play therapy approaches, especially the approach known as Theraplay (Booth & Jernberg, 2010), where one of the goals is to help parents and children connect with each other and strengthen their relationships.

These play activities are appropriate for children between three and ten years old. Some activities are better suited to younger children between ages three and six years old, and some are more suitable for older children, such as those ages seven to ten years old. Many of the activities can also be adapted for children under three years old by making them safer and simpler in consideration of that age range's physical, emotional, and cognitive development. Please remember, however, that toys suitable for children over three years are not suitable for children three years and under. These games can also be used with older children over ten years old by making the games more challenging and interesting.



*One more point:*

*This list of Fun Activities I have compiled contains only a sampling of play activities you and your child can engage in. I recommend making up a list of all your child's favourite play activities and to keep adding to this list over time.*



## **Play activities can have a learning focus**

Play activities can not only be entertaining for your child, but they can also have a particular learning objective or goal. Depending on the developmental or learning objective you would like to focus on for your child, you would choose an appropriate play activity that focuses on the specific skills you want to build or strengthen.

For example:

- When you want to stimulate your child to engage in play, you would choose those activities that are interesting, exciting, and possibly even surprising for your child.
- When you want to calm your child from becoming overstimulated, you would choose those activities that would soothe or regulate your child's nervous system.
- When you want to support your child in developing teamwork skills, you would choose those activities that require some degree of cooperation and working together.

- When you want to facilitate imaginative and creative play for your child, you would provide toys and activities that would encourage this type of play.
- When you want to challenge your child's physical abilities, you would choose activities that have an active physical component to them.

Each playtime is unique. Parents can focus on different play activities with different learning objectives at different times.



*This is an interesting point:*

*Children need to be in the right emotional state before they can learn (Siegel & Bryson, 2012). When children are in an optimal zone of emotional arousal, their nervous systems are, for the most part, in a state of relaxed awareness. This means that your child will be able to learn and understand best when they are engaged and stimulated enough to be curious, interested, and enthusiastic, yet still regulated emotionally and not in an over-aroused, overstimulated, or out-of-control state.*



## Tips for Using the Play Structuring Skills

Before we get into the skills themselves, here are some general tips you will find helpful in using the Engagement and Regulating Skills:

- Choose a play activity thoughtfully
- Be attentive
- Give clear and concise directions
- Provide basic information
- Ask questions to support learning
- Model appropriate actions and behaviors
- Provide positive reinforcement
- Allow some independence
- Correct your child when appropriate



## **Choose a play activity thoughtfully**

An important point to keep in mind is that any toy or play activity must be age appropriate. More importantly, however, since children's development by age will vary, the toy or activity chosen for your child must be appropriate for their level of physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. Plan activities that are neither too hard nor too easy for your child to master. Don't have unrealistic expectations for what your child can do by making the activities too difficult. Don't, however, be afraid to challenge your child with activities that are slightly beyond their abilities but at the same time could be successfully mastered by your child (possibly with just a little assistance from you).

As mentioned above, a particular play activity can have some kind of a developmental or learning objective for children, such as helping with memory or attention skills, learning about winning and losing, or supporting physical development. Many play activities have more than one specific learning goal. For example, active games may focus primarily on physical development; however, many of these games also focus on other skills, such as teamwork and cooperation, focus and attention, playing fairly, and strategic thinking skills. Choose the play activity thoughtfully and carefully to match the learning or developmental objectives that you want for your child.

Also, know your child's learning style. Your child may be a visual, auditory, or kinesthetic learner. Focus on activities that incorporate your child's preferred style of learning. For example, your child may learn better by watching you do something rather than being told what to do.

## **Be attentive during playtime**

Provide your full, undivided attention to your child. Make sure there are no other distractions for either you or your child. Position yourself at your child's level and close enough to maintain the connection but not so close as to be intrusive. Watch your child's face if possible. Don't be distracted, distant, or aloof.

## **Give clear and concise directions**

Before giving directions to your child, get your child's attention. Call your child's name. Position yourself at your child's level, close to and facing them, and make eye contact.

Make your directions clear and concise. Use simple words and sentences your child can understand. Identify exactly what you and your child are to do. Use a calm and engaging tone of voice and facial expression and be patient with your child. You can even use gestures and hand signals to emphasize what you want your child to do. Remember also to break down difficult tasks into easy steps. Focus on the mastery of one small task at a time.

Here are examples of what you could say when giving directions to your child:

- “I have a fun game we can play together! Here’s what we will do. First you will hide your eyes and I will hide five things in the sand. Then, when I say ‘Okay,’ you will open your eyes and look for the five things and put them in this basket.”
- “Let me tell you about a fun game we can play. We’re going to stand facing each other, then I’m going to put a pillow between us, but we have to keep it in place by just standing close to each other and not using our hands. Then I’m going to tell us which direction we are going to move, like left, right, forward, backward. We have to move together and keep the pillow from falling on the floor without using our hands. Ready?”

If you want, you can get your child to repeat the directions back to you. For example:

- “Now, please repeat those directions back to me just so I know you understand what to do.”

Count the number of directions or instructions you give to your child and see if you can reduce them to only those that are most necessary. Sometimes parents can overwhelm their children with too many directions. Children (and adults!) don’t like to be told what to do constantly. Phase out instructions after your child understands the process.

## **Provide basic and easy-to-understand information**

Teach and guide your child by providing basic and easily understandable information that is age appropriate. Children want and need to know how and why things work and why people behave the ways they do. This is one of the main jobs of parenting: to teach and guide your child according to

your personal values and beliefs. You can easily do this within the context of Parent-Directed Playtime.

Provide information to your child in an interesting and playful manner. In other words, you can teach your child through fun play activities. Children engage well in learning when they are provided with interesting and age-appropriate information. Many educational and enrichment toys are meant for this purpose.

## **Ask questions to promote learning**

Essentially, when parents ask their child a question, they are expecting a response from their child. In other words, they are directing and guiding their child to think of and provide some kind of a verbal response.

In Parent-Directed Playtime, parents are encouraged to ask questions to their children because it allows parents to understand their children better. In addition, there are other developmental benefits of asking effective questions to children:

- Facilitating learning through recall and critical thinking processes
- Allowing prompting and scaffolding to help learning
- Improving listening skills
- Helping with language and communication skills
- Encouraging verbal interaction and discussion
- Increasing confidence levels

Ask your child appropriate questions to inspire, stimulate, and support learning. The right question asked will prompt your child to explore further. There are different kinds of questions parents can ask their children: closed, open, and leading questions, and funny or playful questions.

### **Closed questions**

These questions have only one word for the answer, for example either a “yes” or “no” answer. They are quick and easy for children to answer.

## Open questions

These questions require more than just one word answers, so your child will need to respond with more details. These questions generally start with who, what, why, where, when, or how. These questions are excellent at helping your child with memory, language, and thinking skills. Here are some examples:

- “What else can you build with those blocks?”
- “Where else could that puzzle piece go?”
- “How do you think that dinosaur feels?”
- “What do you think would happen if we took away that block?”
- “What colour is that car?”
- “Can you think of another way to \_\_\_\_\_?”
- “What things are the same? Different?”
- “How can you make the tower stronger?”
- “What can you do to make the baby feel happier?”
- “Can you remember the next step?”

## Leading questions

Be careful with these types of questions because they expect your child to agree with the answer implied in your question and are very parent-directed. Use them sparsely!

- “Don’t you think that baby feels sad?”
- “Wouldn’t you like to draw a picture?”

## Funny and playful questions

These questions are fantastic for engaging your child in a fun and positive manner. Children generally love it when their parents ask silly questions!

- “Are airplanes slow?”
- “If you broke an egg, can you put it back together?”
- “Are you smarter than your teacher?”

- “Can elephants fly?”

## **Model appropriate actions and behaviors**

You can also show your child what to do by demonstrating yourself or modeling the action required. Then get your child to try doing the activity and praise their effort. Modelling works by allowing your child to learn by imitation.

Modelling works not only for demonstrating a specific skill, but also when you strive to be a role model to your child by modelling appropriate behaviors, such as your own self-regulation, fair play, and conflict resolution skills.

## **Provide positive reinforcement**

Praise and reinforce your child positively when your child makes an effort to do something or masters a task. This may be for basic things, like making eye contact or listening to and following your directions, or it could be for more complex things, like solving a problem or creating something unusual or interesting. You can praise your child verbally by making eye contact, smiling, and saying things like:

- “Good job!”
- “I like how you listened carefully to the directions.”
- “Well done!”

Instead of directly praising your child, you can also encourage and empower your child by acknowledging their strengths and efforts (see the Encouragement Skill in Chapter 3) by saying things like:

- “You are really proud of what you did.”
- “That was very difficult, but you stuck with it.”
- “You are concentrating very hard on that puzzle.”

## **Allow some independence**

Allow your child some time and space to follow directions, figure things out, and solve the problems they may encounter in play. It is very easy for most parents to step in too soon to rescue their children from working on difficult tasks. Don't take over doing things your child is able to do. Do only what

your child cannot do, and then allow your child to master the rest of the task on their own.

On the other hand, you don't want to let your child struggle with something until they are overly frustrated, are in despair, or have given up. When things get too hard for your child, it is appropriate for you to support your child in some way to master a task. You may provide information, ideas, and suggestions for your child to consider, or you may do a small part of the task yourself until your child is able to continue on their own.

.....  
*Please see the Independence Skill in Chapter 4 for more details on allowing your child opportunities to make choices and decisions.*  
.....

### Correct your child when appropriate

It is important to provide constructive feedback to your child if needed. The best way to do this is to provide lots and lots of positive feedback and reinforcement for each single correction you give. For example, you could say something like:

- “You really took your time to think about what to do. I like how you said the instructions out loud to remind yourself what to do. Then you laid out all the pieces that you needed. Next time, it would work better if you built this on a hard surface instead of on your bed. But look how far you got! Great effort!”

.....  
*Don't forget this important point:*  
*Keep things fun! Although you may be directing and guiding your child when using the Play Structuring Skills, avoid putting yourself strictly in the role of being a teacher to your child. Remember that the goal is to have fun together and not to engage in a power struggle during playtime. Save the formal teaching for other times.*  
.....

**Before we go any further,** let's summarize what we have learned so far in this chapter:

- First, we introduced the two Play Structuring Skills, the Engagement Skill and the Regulating Skill, which are unique to Parent-Directed Playtime.
- The objective of these two parental skills is to help your child develop and learn by challenging, guiding, and supporting them in the exploration and mastery of new skills that are important for physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development.
- This is accomplished through interactive fun play activities between you and your child.
- Finally, we discussed a number of general tips for using the Play Structuring Skills, including choosing an activity, being attentive, giving clear directions and information, asking appropriate questions, modelling behaviors, providing positive reinforcement, allowing some independence, and providing positive feedback.

Now we will discuss the first of the Play Structuring Skills, the Engagement Skill. After a brief description of how to use this skill, we will discuss examples, tips for using this skill specifically, examples of how to use this skill in teaching your child, and why we should use this skill.

## **Play Structuring Skill #1: The Engagement Skill**

### **How Do You Use This Skill?**

The objective of the Engagement Skill is to **stimulate and maintain interactive engagement of your child with you in play**. To use the Engagement Skill, get your child's attention and initiate and maintain a connection by interacting with your child in a fun manner.

By using this skill in Parent-Directed Playtime, you will encourage your child to engage in shared, positive interactions together through play activities. The result will be two-way mutual focus and attention on each other. Children will learn that interactions with their parents can be pleasant and

enjoyable. When parents use this skill, children will also be supported in maintaining focus and attention and following directions.

The Engagement Skill can be very useful if your child appears stuck and is hesitant to start playing, cannot decide what to do, seems bored, or appears to be ignoring or rejecting you.

## Examples of Using the Engagement Skill

Here are some ways you can engage your child in play using the Engagement Skill:

- Imitate what your child is doing
- Initiate play by doing something
- Initiate play by directing your child
- Initiate imaginary play

### Imitate what your child is doing

Imitate what your child is doing if they are already engaged in playing something. Ideally, your child will become interested in what you are doing and may engage by interacting with you in some way. For example:

- Your child is lining up their cars. You start lining up some other cars. Ideally, your child will notice what you are doing and may ask you to do something, such as lining up all the trucks.
- Your child is making a block tower. You do the same. Your child may ask you to start building a house together.

You can even elaborate on your child's play by adding something to make it different or more complex. For example:

- Your child is rolling some small balls of Play-doh. You decide to elaborate on what she is doing by rolling out a long length of playdough to make a rope. Your child may then start making her own rope of playdough. You could then add small balls of playdough to your rope. Your child may do the same or come up with more ideas.
- Your child is putting some play food together in a bowl. You elaborate on what he is doing by putting food in a bowl, mixing it with a spoon,



and serving it on a plate to his stuffed teddy bear. This may prompt your child to copy you or to elaborate on the play by adding a stuffed dog to the play scenario.

## **Initiate play by doing something**

In this strategy, you start the playtime by deciding on an activity your child enjoys doing and then setting up this activity. This may spark your child's interest in engaging with this play activity. For example:

- You get out a basket of animals and start putting them into groups, then use some popsicle sticks to create fences between them. This may prompt your child to engage by adding some food and water into the pens for the animals.
- You say something like, "Let's put a marble run together today," then you start putting it together. This could prompt your child to join you in putting the toy together and then engaging with you in play once it is assembled.

## **Initiate play by directing your child**

Here you are engaging your child in play by giving them clear and concise directions or instructions on playing some kind of interactive fun play activity.

### **Example #1: Hand-clapping game**

- Choose a time when your child is not distracted by something else and use the Engagement Skill to get your child's attention. Say in a playful and enthusiastic manner, "I have a few minutes to play now and I have an idea for a fun game. I am going to clap something, and then you will clap the same."
- Clap out a simple rhythm and then watch your child copy the rhythm.
- Show positive facial expressions and body language and express enthusiasm for your child's efforts.
- Repeat with a slightly different simple rhythm.

- As your child masters the simple rhythms, to keep them engaged, gradually clap more complex rhythms, clap while singing a song, use different ways of clapping, and take turns being the leader and follower.

### **Example #2: Free throw game**

- Divide your play area in half, possibly by laying a rope or piece of tape on the ground. Get together some cotton balls or foam (Nerf) balls, divide them in half, and place half the balls on one side of the room and half on the other side.
- Using the Engagement Skill, get your child's attention, and say in an energetic manner, "We can play for a few minutes now. Let me tell you about a fun game. You are on that side of the room and I am on this side. This rope on the floor will mark where we cannot cross over to the other side. I will have a pile of balls and you will have a pile of balls to start with. When I say 'go,' we both start throwing our balls over to the other side. You try to get all the balls from your side onto my side and I try to get all the balls from my side onto your side."
- When you and your child are in place, say "go." Start throwing the balls from your side onto your child's side. Express lots of excitement and enthusiasm in trying to get the balls from your side over onto your child's side. Pillows can be used for shields if desired.
- Make the game challenging enough to keep your child engaged, but not so challenging as to overwhelm them. When you want to end the game, let your child get all the balls onto your side.

### **Here's another fun activity: Make up your own game!**

Instead of doing an activity or playing a game by the rules, you and your child can make up your own rules. Children love it when they can take control of a game! I used this activity frequently with great success when I was working with children as a play therapist.

You can start by making up some rules for a simple game and playing this game together. For example, you could gather up a small bouncy ball, a ruler, and a plastic cup and, using the Engagement Skill, say, "I have an idea for a fun game: Let's see how many times we can roll the little ball into the cup

with our eyes closed.” Play this game together. Then ask your child to make up a different game using the same props and play this game together following your child’s rules. Or, if you want, you can start with a known game and then be flexible and creative by changing and adapting the rules as the play goes along. When you support your child in making up their own game or activity, you are also encouraging them to use their creative skills while having fun interacting with you.

.....  
*Please go to the Appendix to view more examples of fun play activities for Parent-Directed Playtime.*  
.....

### Initiate imaginary play

Adults often feel uncomfortable engaging with children in imaginary or pretend play. Maybe we have forgotten how to play make-believe, or we may feel silly or immature if we get involved in imaginary play. We may even be laughed at by others when we play this way! This is unfortunate because playing together in an imaginary, pretend, or make-believe way raises the parent-child relationship up to a whole new level of connection and positivity.

In Parent-Directed Playtime and using the Engagement Skill, you can use imaginary play to stimulate and engage your child. Pretend and imaginary play, where a play scenario is imagined and played out, is fun for parents and children to engage in together. In Parent-Directed Playtime, you are in a Directive Role, so you can structure, add to, elaborate, enrich, and facilitate your child’s imaginary play. For example, you can add to or change the plot, add characters, or put a different ending on a story. I call this **Parent-Directed Imaginary Play**.

.....  
*Please see the section below on Structured Imaginary Play, a form of Parent-Directed Imaginary Play, for more discussion on using this style of play to support and guide children.*  
.....

Parent-Directed Imaginary Play and Child-Directed Imaginary Play (see Chapter 4, Following Directions Skill) are similar in that parent and child

are engaging in imaginary play, however in Parent-Directed Imaginary Play, parents can add to or change the plot of the imaginary story, but in Child-Directed Imaginary Play, parents follow their child's directions in how the plot of the imaginary story unfolds.

With Child-Directed Imaginary Play, you wait for your child to invite you to join them in imaginary play (for example, your child says, "Daddy, you be the teacher.") and you use the Following Directions Skill to play the way your child wants you to play. For what I call Parent-Directed Imaginary Play, you use the Engagement Skill to initiate and maintain imaginary play by structuring, elaborating on, and adding to the play story.

When you engage in Parent-Directed Imaginary Play, in the most basic sense, you and your child will be:

- Using your imaginations to make up different play scenarios that have various plots and outcomes, even if they become make-believe or fantastical
- Using various toys or other objects to represent real-life or make-believe things or situations
- Bringing to life various characters in the story by taking on the roles of and giving voice to those characters



*Please see the Following Directions Skill in Chapter 4 under Child-Directed Imaginary Play for some basic tips on taking on an imaginary role, including pretending, voicing a character, and exaggerating your emotions.*



Here are some additional ideas for Parent-Directed Imaginary Play where you are using the Engagement Skill to structure the imaginary play:

- Provide ideas and props
- Portray different characters
- Don't be too directive
- Engage in mutual storytelling

## Providing ideas and props

With Parent-Directed Imaginary Play, you can provide ideas or suggestions about a play activity and provide the necessary props as well. To start, you could say something like, “Let’s build a castle from this box”; “Let’s set up a school for your stuffed animals today”; “Let’s build a farm with the blocks today”; “Let’s build an international space station”; “Let’s set up a vet clinic for your miniature horses”; or “Let’s set up a puppet theatre and have a show for your stuffed animals.”

Here are some ideas for setting up imaginary play scenarios:

- **Create your own house or school:** Use boxes for the buildings. Get your child to tell you where to draw the rooms on the inside of the box and where to cut out the windows and doors. Use Lego, smaller boxes, or blocks for furniture. Use fabric scraps for carpets, blankets, and curtains. If you have a lid for the box, you could make a rooftop lookout. Add things outside like a playground, garden, or pool. Get your child to help choose a family for the house or some children and a teacher for the school. Create various play scenarios such as a normal day at home or school. These can be the settings for unlimited imaginative play scenarios.
- **Create your own town, farm, fort, space outpost, or fantasy land:** Use boxes, Lego, or blocks for buildings or various structures. Find things to use for fences or barriers (popsicle sticks), mountains (stones or rocks), caves or hiding places, water (blue fabric works well), trees, and flowers. Provide miniature items, such as people, animals, cars, trucks, vehicles, airplanes, and boats. These props can be the settings for unlimited imaginative play scenarios and themes involving various characters such as vulnerable people, dangerous situations (natural disasters), dangerous people (attackers, bad guys, monsters), protective and rescue people, mastermind strategists and planners, or teams or groups working together cooperatively.
- **Store:** Set up items to sell. Provide something for a shopping basket. Use something for a cash register and make or buy play money. Provide old credit cards, wallets, and purses. Write up bills and receipts on small pieces of paper. Customers can take items home and set them up at home.

- **Picnic, dinner, or birthday party:** Invite stuffed animals, dolls, or any other characters. Set up the place settings using a tablecloth, plates, utensils, and/or napkins. Use play food and empty food containers. Find something to use as a stove or oven. Use old kitchen spoons and a pot. Have something unexpected happen, such as a storm coming during the picnic, someone spilling the food on the floor, someone unexpected coming for dinner, or someone having a surprise party.



*Please see the Appendix under “Imaginary play scenarios” for more ideas.*



### **Portraying different characters**

There are so many opportunities for you to take on different roles in Parent-Directed Imaginary Play. This is an excellent way to help your child learn about the real world. Here are just a few examples of characters you can decide to portray:

- Children often like it, if they are portraying a character in danger, for you to take on the role of a wise person or protector and warn their character of danger. For example, if your child is moving her doll very close to the edge of the couch, you could take on the role of the wise person and say something like, “Oh, be careful! Don’t get too close to the edge, stay back”; or “Sit down . . . Oh no, you might fall if you get closer!”
- Children love it when parents portray a role they can identify with, like a small or vulnerable character. For example, you could put a miniature person under a pillow and say something like, “Help! I’m trapped under here!” or “Help me, I’m stuck!”
- You can role model appropriate behaviors to help your child learn about feelings and develop coping skills through your character. For example, you could take hold of a stuffed animal and say something like, “Okay, I’m feeling really nervous. That sound scared me. What can I do? I’ll take some deep breaths to calm down . . . Breathe in . . . Breathe out . . . Okay, I’m feeling better now.”

- Children also love it when adults portray a character as incompetent, clumsy, or bumbling. This can be very comical and engaging for kids. For example, you can have your dinosaur character trip and fall into a hole and say, “Whoops! Where did that come from?”
- When playing a scary, dangerous or “bad” character, you can exaggerate emotions and personality traits to engage your child. For example, you could pretend to be an angry dragon and, as you move the dragon around, you could say aggressively, “Ack, ack, ack, I’m coming to get you! Look out! Here I come!” However, don’t overexaggerate emotions that may frighten or over-arouse your child. Always observe your child’s reaction to your character and adjust your emotional intensity accordingly.
- Children often like it when parents play a character that is “sneaky” or a “trickster” devising cunning schemes intended to deceive, cheat, or outwit someone. For example, your character could say something like, “Ha ha, I’m going to trick them and hide the gem here!”

### **Don’t be too directive**

Here’s something to be careful of: In Parent-Directed Imaginary Play, parents do need to be aware of not being too directive of the imagined scenario and activities. Imaginary play provides children with opportunities to make choices and decisions, to use their imaginations, and to be creative with ideas. If parents are too rigid and are overly directive in the play, children do not develop the ability to make independent choices in the play. Remember, you do not want to become so directive that you are merely entertaining your child with your story and there is no real parent-child interaction going on.

### **Engage in mutual storytelling**

Here is a game I found very useful in helping children to engage in imaginary play. This game was developed by Richard A. Gardner, MD (Gardner, 1986) and has been used by many play therapists. I have adapted his game slightly to encourage engagement and interaction:

- Say to your child, “You choose three toys and I choose three toys and then we make up a story together about them.”
- Give your child time to choose three toys while you choose three toys.

- Say to your child, “Okay, good, now let’s start to make up a story,” then begin the story using the chosen toys. For example, it might begin, “Once upon a time there was a dog, a cat, a fire truck, a dinosaur, Superman, and a car.” Then say to your child, “Now it’s your turn.”
- Give your child time to set up things and start telling you something.
- When your child has provided something, and has paused, you would say, “Okay, it’s my turn now.” You would continue with the story, adding just enough to encourage your child to continue. Then say, “Okay, now it’s your turn.”
- Repeat this back and forth process as the story continues, allowing your child to use their imaginative and creative skills to choose how the story ultimately unfolds.

### **Example of Parent-Directed Imaginary**

#### **Play: “Let’s play dragons today!”**

Here is an example of what ten minutes of Parent-Directed Imaginary Play might look like:

- Using the Engagement Skill, you initiate an imaginary play scenario by saying, “I have ten minutes to play now. Let’s play with your dragons today. Which one should I be and which one should you be?”
- Your child chooses the purple dragon for you and the green dragon for him.
- You begin to structure the plot by saying, “Okay, today, the dragons need to find a new home.” Then, taking on the role of the purple dragon, you take your dragon and move it under the desk and say, “Here’s our new home. This looks nice and cozy! Come over here with me, Green Dragon.”
- Ideally, your child will follow your directions and move his dragon to where you indicate.
- You continue using the Engagement Skill to elaborate the plot by saying, “Hmm, we don’t want anybody else to come into our new house so we need to build a wall. I’ve got it! Let’s use these pillows to



build a wall!” Then you start to bring over some pillows to pile up in front of the desk.

- Ideally, your child will engage in the play and will bring pillows over as well.
- After the wall is built, you say, “Okay, now we need to make some beds so we can go to sleep.” You then get some Lego and start putting together a bed for your dragon. Ideally, your child will build his dragon a bed as well.
- You let your child know that the end of playtime is near and say, “We have one more minute to play, then we have to stop playing for now.” You move some of the pillows out of the way and put your bed under the table and your dragon on top of the bed. Your child seems hesitant, so you direct him by giving a voice to your dragon and saying, “Come on in, Green Dragon. Put your bed here. It’s time for bed now. I’m so tired!”
- Ideally, your child will follow your directions and put his dragon to bed under the table beside your dragon.
- You then replace the pillows in front of the desk and end the playtime by saying, “Time to stop playing now. We can play again another time.” This is a great start to a fun play scenario that you and your child can continue some other time!



*Please go to Chapter 4 under Child-Directed Imaginary Play, Example #8: “Dad, you be the purple dragon,” for an example of what ten minutes of Child-Directed Imaginary Play would look like so you can compare it to the above example of Parent-Directed Imaginary Play.*



The above examples offer some basic ways you can use the Engagement Skill to engage your child in play when you are in a Directive Role and facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime. There are, of course, many more activities that can be used to engage your child in play; whatever you choose, **there are a few**

**things to keep in mind when using the Engagement Skill** that can help make you more successful.

## Tips for Using the Engagement Skill

Here are some general tips to keep in mind for using the Engagement Skill:

- Choose interesting and stimulating play activities
- Increase your emotional intensity
- Maintain engagement

### Choose interesting play activities

Choose play activities that are interesting, stimulating, and possibly somewhat challenging for your child. These activities would spark your child's interests, possibly being novel or having an element of excitement or surprise. Think of things that make your child happy or excited and incorporate these into the play in some way, but remember to keep the activity age-appropriate; you don't want something too challenging, otherwise your child may disengage from the play or become resistant. However, you also don't want something too boring!

If you want, you can collect and put aside a set of toys that you bring out just for Parent-Directed Playtime. Some parents find this helps to engage their child in the playtime because the toys are novel and not used in everyday play.

### Increase your emotional intensity

With the Engagement Skill, you want to increase your level of emotional intensity. Be more active, energetic, and enthusiastic. Use a louder voice and speak more quickly. Smile and laugh when appropriate and in general exaggerate your emotions without being frightening. Get your child's attention by calling their name, making eye contact, and smiling.

Include playfulness and excitement in your interactions to stimulate your child's interest and curiosity. This is a time when you can act silly, and even goofy, to increase your child's emotional arousal. Talk in a silly voice! Make a funny face! Pretend to be sad, mad, scared, shocked, confused, or incompetent and act out these feelings in an exaggerated, but funny, manner.

Playfully incorporate surprise into the play by doing something unexpected or novel. Surprise (for example, peek-a-boo for infants) can be very engaging. Surprising elements of play work well for all ages of children, as long as it remains a happy and fun and not scary or frightening experience for your child.

## Maintain engagement

With the Engagement Skill, not only do you want to initiate interactive play, you also want to maintain interactive play. Here are some tips to keep your child engaged:

- Try different variations of the activity or game. For example, if you are doing a mini version of hide-and-seek where you are hiding some toys and getting your child to find them, reverse it so that your child hides the toys and you find them.
- Make the game more challenging. For example, you can expand the area where you are hiding the toys or choose smaller toys to hide.
- Include an element of surprise or novelty by, for example, adding a “special” toy to the ones being hidden for your child, such as a toy they haven’t seen in a while, or even a small brand new toy (like something from the dollar store).
- If your child becomes resistant, tell your child that first you are going to play the game or do the activity according to your rules, and then after that, you will play the game according to their rules.
- Switch to a different activity altogether to spark renewed interest.



*Here’s something to keep in mind:*

*The goal with this skill is to stimulate your child and engage happily in play together and not to cause your child to become over-aroused or out of control. Please know that some children can become overwhelmed by increased emotional, physical, and verbal intensity. If you feel this is the case, it is important to increase your emotional intensity with your child very gradually. For example, you would start with a very low or even non-existent level of emotional arousal with your child*

*and then you would gradually increase your level of emotional arousal and playfulness so as not to overwhelm your child. Remember also that some children are naturally reserved and will never reach the level of emotional intensity that other children will, and trying to stimulate these children above what they can handle is not appropriate.*



**Let's briefly summarize some of the above points** about the Engagement Skill we have just covered.

- The objective of the Engagement Skill is to stimulate and maintain interactive engagement of your child with you in play.
- We have identified some ways parents can engage their children in play using the Engagement Skill, such as imitating their children's play and initiating play by setting something up or directing their children to participate in a specific play activity.
- We also began to examine Parent-Directed Imaginary Play and how parents can structure and facilitate this type of play to engage their child in imaginary play. We contrasted Parent-Directed Imaginary Play with Child-Directed Imaginary Play, which was discussed previously.
- Finally, we identified some tips for parents for using the Engagement Skill, including choosing interesting activities, increasing emotional intensity, and maintaining engagement in play.

With this in mind, we now discuss another important dimension of the Engagement Skill: how it can be used to help your child learn.

## **Examples of Using the Engagement Skill for Teaching**

We've already discussed some basic ways for parents to initiate play with their children using the Engagement Skill. There are also, however, games and forms of play where parents use the Engagement Skill in order to guide and teach their children. These include:

- Active games for physical challenge

- Games for attention, memory, and impulse control skills
- Cooperative and competitive games for thinking and social skills
- Structured Imaginary Play

Because there are many important nuances to games and play of this nature (especially cooperative and competitive games and Structured Imaginary Play), this section contains many details and examples. Once again, I ask you to please not be overwhelmed by the amount of information presented to you. There is no need to try master everything at once! Explore these skills in increments, at your own pace, and monitor your progress as you go.

## Active games for physical challenge

Active games will present a physical challenge that will stimulate and energize children through movement and generally focus on the development of physical coordination skills that include both large and small muscles. Active games include popular children's games such as follow-the-leader, tag, and balloon volleyball, as well as more structured active games that could evolve into formal team or individual sports activities. Active play can happen indoors or outdoors. Some active games related to sports activities may use modified, or even real, sports equipment.

Many active games involve balls. For indoor play, use "indoor balls" that can be played with safely indoors, such as soft foam or Nerf balls, beanbags, balloons, cotton balls, beach balls, small pillows, and scrunched up paper. Indoor balls are safer to play with than regular balls and can often result in more unstructured and creative fun play than using regular balls. Foam bats, foam hockey sticks, and pool noodles are also very useful for active indoor play as well.

### **Example: Balloon volleyball**

Tell your child you have some time to play and, using the Engagement Skill, explain, "I have an idea for a fun game. Let's see how many times we can hit the balloon and keep it in the air without letting it touch the ground. If it does touch the ground, we have to start counting at number one again." Start the game and see how high of a count you can get.

To make it more challenging:

- Use only specific parts of your body to hit the balloon, such as one finger, your elbow, or your head
- Put a rope or piece of tape on the floor to mark the play area into two halves so each person must stay on one side only
- Stay seated on the floor to play the game

## **Games for attention, memory, and impulse control skills**

Well-known children's games such as hide-and-seek, Red Light/Green Light, and Simon Says are games that can be modified and played with one parent and one child. These activities help with developing children's attention and memory skills, impulse control skills, and skills in following directions. Additionally, physical skills are also part of many of these games. There are also many board and card games that can help children with attention, memory, and impulse control skills. Yeager and Yeager (2008) have adapted many children's games for supporting children with ADHD.

### **Example: Simon Says (Yeager & Yeager, 2008, pp. 58-59)**

Have your child stand at one end of the room (starting line) and you stand at the other end (finish line). Using the Engagement Skill, explain to your child that you will be giving them a command to do something and that if you say "Simon says" before the command, they are to do what you say, but if you give the command without saying "Simon says," then they are not to follow your command.

Examples of commands would be:

- Take one giant step forward
- Touch your toes
- Take one baby step backward
- Hop on one foot
- Do a jumping jack
- Take two bunny hops forward
- Sit down
- Give yourself a hug

The goal is for your child to get to the finish line where you are. However, if your child makes a wrong choice and does the action when you do not say “Simon Says” before the command, they are to go back to the starting line.

As you go along, you may want to make it more challenging by doing the following:

- Use words similar to “Simon says” but different, such as “Pieman says,” “Slyman says,” “Simon suggests,” or “Simon wants you to”
- Say “Let’s do this” and demonstrate a move
- Say your child’s name first. For example, “Michelle, take one baby step forward”

Celebrate when your child reaches you at the finish line!

## **Cooperative and competitive games for thinking and social skills**

Games with rules, such as board and card games or sports activities, are entertaining, but also focus on helping children with strategic thinking and problem-solving skills. Games with rules also help children with social skills like cooperation, teamwork, following rules, taking turns, winning and losing, and fair play skills (Reid, 1993).

Many games can be categorized as cooperative games, competitive games of luck/chance, or competitive games of strategy/skill. Board and card games fall into this category. Most sports activities fall under the category of competitive games of strategy/skill.

As children grow and develop, their decline in an ego-centric perspective enables them to begin to appreciate competitive games. But, prior to this, children under the age of six years often have difficulty enjoying games with rules and can find them overly frustrating (Reid, 1993). The simplest and easiest of games with rules requires more advanced cognitive abilities than does free play. That being said, games with rules help children develop planning and decision-making skills and definitely contribute to children’s social development. However, as stated, games with rules generally require a more highly developed level of thinking and involve the concept of competition, which can be unhelpful for the social and emotional development of children if introduced too early.

Thus, competitive games of strategy/skill are generally meant for more mature children (over six years). However, there are many competitive games of luck/chance and cooperative games that are suitable for younger children (four to five years old). These games can be very entertaining and will not only focus on helping children with strategic thinking and problem-solving skills, but also will help children learn about cooperation, teamwork, following rules, taking turns, winning and losing, and fair play. Cooperative games are fantastic for building a connection with your child and at the same time helping to develop cooperation and teamwork skills.

### **Tips for playing games with rules**

- Make sure your child wants to play the game
- Match the game with your child's developmental and skill level
- Let your child become familiar with various components of the game first
- Go over the rules of the game to start. Support your child in learning individual parts of the game and practice the individual parts ahead of time. For example, show your child how to match cards if that is part of the game.
- When you play the game, support your child in developing skills such as matching, identification, labelling, or reading. Prompt and remind your child what to do. You can ask questions to support learning the skill.
- Don't focus on winning or competition. Focus on the process of having fun together.
- Praise efforts as well as success
- Celebrate the success of others, acknowledge the efforts of others, and consider the feelings of both others and oneself when winning or losing. Role model appropriate ways to handle winning and losing.
- Encourage healthy competition; make it fun to compete but not too challenging; support taking turns and being patient



- If your child becomes overly frustrated with the rules, be flexible and modify the rules to keep your child engaged. You may even want to allow your child to make up their own rules for the game. At a later time, after your child has calmed down, have a discussion about feelings of frustration/anger/disappointment and appropriate behaviors when your child feels that way for next time.
- When the games become too easy and somewhat boring, ask your child for ideas on how to make the game more challenging or complicated. You can also provide suggestions for a more challenging game as well.
- Have fun together!

### **Cheating**

Cheating is basically acting unfairly to gain an advantage, and for children this often means not following the rules in game play. Cheating is very normal in game play with children, especially those of younger ages, and reflects a child's desire to be in control. Also, there is an inherent unfairness when a parent plays a competitive game against a child that the child is likely to understand, which makes the child's desire to cheat stronger in order to win against a more powerful player.

When cheating happens, you can identify the unfair behavior, then:

- Allow it to happen and acknowledge the child's need to win by, for example, saying something like, "Oh, you are moving extra spaces; it looks like you really want to win" (for children with low self-esteem, this may be helpful for a certain period of time until self-esteem improves)
- Put a handicap on yourself
- Choose a game of chance rather than skill
- Choose a cooperative game instead of competitive game

### **Some things to consider when playing competitively with your child**

You may be asking yourself, "When should I let my child win, and when should I challenge my child and be more competitive so it is more difficult

for my child to win?” You may even wonder, “Should I win over my child in a competitive activity?” These are excellent questions and will require you to take into account the individual play situation and your child’s specific needs at that time.

For some children, especially younger ones, letting them win helps them to build confidence in their abilities. But as children start to learn about losing, they will also begin to master feelings of disappointment and frustration at not winning. It can be a delicate balance for parents not to be too competitive with their children but to be competitive enough to help children learn and develop appropriate skills.

It helps to ask yourself how much you want to challenge your child in a certain situation. Do you want to provide your child with an opportunity to win and to feel proud and confident and in control, or do you want to challenge your child by being more competitive? This is a difficult question to answer, but is well worth thinking about!

## **Structured Imaginary Play**

Structured Imaginary Play is a special way of using Parent-Directed Imaginary Play (see above) to guide or teach your child by using imaginary play. With Structured Imaginary Play, you can convey a message to your child in various ways. For example, you can:

- Insert a moral or lesson into the imaginary play scenario
- Role model appropriate language and behaviors within the imaginary play story
- Attach appropriate endings to a story so that there is a sense of completeness and stability at the end

This style of play is a unique way for you to teach or convey information to your child. Because you are in a Directive Role in Parent-Directed Playtime, you can structure your child’s imaginary play according to your child’s needs in a way that would be beneficial for your child. In other words, you can “stay in the metaphor of play” and convey a learning message to your child, especially when you would like to provide information to clarify new or confusing situations or experiences in your child’s life. Children do well with this approach since play is often called the language of childhood.

Children understand concepts much better through play scenarios rather than through abstract verbal explanations.

With Structured Imaginary Play, parents will make up an imaginary story ahead of time. Let's get an idea now of some of the specific themes you could use for your imaginary story and then look at some strategies for making up your imaginary story.

### **Themes as learning objectives**

With this strategy, you would first decide on a theme that helps deliver the message you want to convey to your child. There are an almost unlimited number of different themes you can introduce depending on what you would like to communicate and reinforce to your child. Here are some common themes you could structure for your child using this skill:

- Reinforcing a sense of safety and security
- Being surrounded and nurtured by safe and familiar adults
- Being protected or rescued
- Escaping from danger
- Normalizing scary experiences
- Being assertive
- Being kind and generous to others
- Being friendly and cooperative
- Starting school
- Going to the doctor
- Going on a sleepover

### **Making up the imaginary story**

Doris Brett (1988) provides parents with some wonderful tips on making up imaginary stories for children. Basically, after you have identified a theme, you would make up the story. The plot will parallel what is actually happening in your child's life. The story is made up so that your child could identify with the protagonist, main character, hero, or heroine. Details will generally be similar; however, some things, like names, would not be identical because

you want to disguise the fact that the story is about your child specifically! You are not just reporting your child's situation literally; you are representing it symbolically through imaginary play.

Think about the problem or difficult situation that has initiated the need for using Structured Imaginary Play. Then, identify the feelings you think your child is experiencing from this situation. What do you think it is like for your child? Basically, you want to mirror your child's feelings and experiences.

Next, identify your learning objective for the story. What points do you want to stress? What ideas do you want to get across? What positive themes do you want to reinforce? Are there any solutions or coping strategies you want to introduce? You want to structure the story so that the main character your child identifies with will go on to master their problems or come to terms with the difficult situation, or so that there is a positive ending or outcome for them, such as finding safety and comfort from family or other powerful and safe others.

Finally, you would structure the ending in a positive manner, giving your child hope, possibilities, options, or even practical tools for overcoming the difficult situation.

Use various toys or other items as props for the imaginary play scenario. For example:

- Use stuffed animals, puppets, or miniature figures to act a certain way or to solve a problem
- Use blocks, cardboard boxes, and popsicle sticks to represent, for example, a house, school, castle, fort, jail, hospital, furniture, fences, cars, airplanes, or playground equipment

You can also take on a role directly yourself by dressing up and using toys or other items as props. For example:

- Use the items in a toy medical kit to pretend to be a doctor
- Use the toy food and kitchen items to pretend to be a restaurant owner
- Use the toy cash register and various toys and pretend to be a shop owner
- Put on a mask and pretend to be a powerful superhero

- Set out paper and crayons and pretend to be a teacher

**Now let's look at three examples** of using Structured Imaginary Play. In these examples, Structured Imaginary Play is used to help your child gain a better understanding of difficult situations, to role model appropriate behaviors for your child, and to practice future situations.

### **Gaining a better understanding of things**

You can use Structured Imaginary Play to counteract and clarify difficult situations that occur in real life, such as natural disasters, war, conflict, and violence, that are all too common in our world these days. This approach can be used by parents to support their children in gaining a better and healthier understanding of these difficult events. You can add clarifying, confirming, and reassuring facts about a situation through imaginary play. For example, if there has been a recent violent event in your community, you can structure an imaginary play scenario where vulnerable characters, such as kittens or puppies, are protected from danger by a strong and powerful character, such as a good dragon. Or, if your child has had a bad experience with a dog, you could set up a play scenario and incorporate a friendly dog to normalize the experience of being around dogs where the lesson would be that most dogs are friendly.

#### **Example #1: "The horses are in trouble!"**

- Your child is playing with her miniature horses and has set up a scenario in which the horses are getting trapped by falling through a hole in the lid of a box. Since there has recently been serious war and conflicts taking place in certain parts of the world, you decide to structure a theme of being rescued and finding safety from danger in order to reinforce your child's sense of safety and security.
- Using the Engagement Skill, you take on the imaginary role of a miniature character who is not trapped, for example a large horse, who will be the "rescuer" and have that character take a popsicle stick that would represent a ladder and say something like, "Here, horses, I will help you escape from this trap; climb up this ladder! Hurry!"

- You then have the rescuer make a small hiding spot for the rescued horses and have it say, “Look, here’s a safe hiding spot I made for you. Quickly, get in!”
- You then have a “good” dragon come along to take the horses further away to safety by making the dragon say something like, “Okay, horses, jump on and I am going to fly you to a safe place. Hold on!”

### **Role modelling appropriate behaviors**

Structured Imaginary Play is also a great way to support your child in learning healthy behaviors and important social skills, since you can role-play these appropriate behaviors and skills in the imaginary play. Take a real situation that is hard for your child and turn it into pretend play and practice appropriate responses. For example, if your child is having difficulty meeting other children and making friends, you can set up an imaginary play scenario using miniature people or puppets where you take on the role of a child similar to your child. You would then role-play your character in a way that demonstrates what your child could do and say in this situation in real life in order to become part of the play group.

### **Example #2: “I feel shy at the playground.”**

- Using the Engagement Skill, you set up an imaginary play scenario with several Playmobil children characters. You structure it so the children are at a playground and are playing on the equipment.
- Then, you take hold of another child character and have that character approach the other children already playing. You have the new character say something like, “Hi! My name is Alex. What are you doing?”
- You can make “Alex” follow along and do what the other children are doing.
- You can make “Alex” show the other children a fun trick.
- Throughout the play scenario, you are role modelling friendly, approaching behaviors with the “Alex” character.

## Practice future situations

Structured Imaginary Play is also a good way to practice a future event that your child will experience. For example, if your child's first day of school is approaching, you can set up an imaginary play scenario with miniature people that represent children, parents, and teachers, and perhaps something like a small box to represent the school. Then you would play out a scenario for your child about what will happen on that first day, emphasizing positive feelings and outcomes. This way, using the language of play, your child will get a chance to understand the situation ahead of time, resulting in reduced anxiety levels.

### Example #3: "I'm going to stay overnight at Grandma's!"

- Your child is going to stay at Grandma's house overnight for the first time. You decide to structure an imaginary play scenario to help your child prepare for this.
- Using the Engagement Skill, you choose characters that would represent you, your child, and Grandma. You also choose props that would represent your house and Grandma's house.
- You tell the story of "a child" who will represent your child by saying something like, "Once upon a time, there was a little boy (or girl or child) who lived in a house with his mommy (or family)." You can add details that are similar to your child's situation, such as saying, "This little boy had a little brown doggie who slept on his bed every night. One day, mommy told the little boy that he was going to go to Grandma's house and sleep there overnight."
- You can then identify possible feelings that would arise for your child by saying something like, "The little boy felt very excited because he has always loved visiting Grandma. But he was also feeling a little bit nervous because he had never slept away from home. And he was feeling confused because he didn't know what Grandma had at breakfast!"
- Then you would play out what will happen at Grandma's house using the toy characters and props, continuing to identify possible feelings, both comfortable and uncomfortable. However, you would

structure the story so that the general experience is very positive for the child character.

- You would end the story in a positive manner, saying something like, “After breakfast, Mommy came to pick up her boy and they went home together and played soccer in the back yard.”

.....

*Here’s something you may be interested in: When I was working as a play therapist, I found the book, **Annie Stories: A Special Kind of Storytelling**, by clinical psychologist Doris Brett, very helpful in giving me ideas for structuring imaginary play. “Annie Stories” are therapeutic stories for children aimed at helping them deal with common problems and are written for parents on how to make up and tell these stories for their own children. In addition to this book, most children’s books will have some kind of a theme related to scenarios children may encounter and are good sources of ideas for **Structured Imaginary Play**.*

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## Why Use the Engagement Skill?

As we’ve seen through discussing examples showing how the Engagement Skill looks in practice, there are many reasons why you would want to stimulate your child’s engagement and interest in play. Some children may be resistant or unresponsive to a parent’s attempts at engagement and connection for many reasons. The Engagement Skill is useful for all children, but is especially appropriate for children who are unsure or hesitant to initiate play, who may be withdrawn at times, or who find it difficult to engage interactively.

The Engagement Skill will support your child in engaging in play and allow your child to experience positive and playful interactions with you where you and your child are focused on each other and where you are encouraging these types of interactions. You are basically creating for your child a positive association for interacting with you. By encouraging your child to engage in shared, positive interactions together through play, you are ultimately helping your child to learn to communicate, to share intimacy, and to enjoy interpersonal contact.



With the Engagement Skill, you are also challenging your child and supporting your child in mastering various activities. Most parents want to teach and guide their children to learn skills that are helpful for their healthy development. The Engagement Skill will allow parents to teach and guide their children in learning important skills through the positive environment of play. By learning important life skills, children will develop competence and confidence in themselves, which is ultimately necessary for the development of positive self-esteem.

## Getting Started Activity #8: Practice Using the Engagement Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Directive Role using the Engagement Skill. You will also be using the four Empathic Skills to attune to and connect with your child and the Regulating and Limit-Setting Skills as needed. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3, 5, and 8 ahead of time.

**Instructions:** Pick a time when you have some free time (at least ten minutes) and your child is not overly engaged in something else. Choose an activity that would be fun and interesting, and possibly somewhat challenging, for your child to engage in with you. Set up what you will need for the activity ahead of time.

Using the Engagement Skill, initiate the play activity with your child. Increase your emotional intensity by being playful or even surprising. Notice how your child responds. Maintain engagement by keeping things fun and interesting. If necessary, try different variations of the activity or change to a different activity altogether. Encourage and praise all of your child's efforts as they try to master things.

If your child begins to struggle with a task, don't step in immediately to help; allow a bit of time for your child to problem solve and continue with the task. However, don't let your child become overly frustrated; provide lots of encouragement and just enough guidance and support to allow your child to continue and master the task, then praise your child for the effort. You can also make the activity less challenging and allow your child to experience success, then gradually increase the difficulty of the activity.

Intersperse the Empathic Skills (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, and Encouragement Skills) throughout in order to connect with and attune to your child.

If your child becomes over-aroused with the game you are engaging in, use the Regulating Skill (covered below) to calm your child; you may need to switch to a different activity altogether if the chosen activity is too stimulating.

If your child engages in unsafe or destructive behaviors, use the Limit-Setting Skill to end the behavior.

Afterwards, reflect on this activity. How did you feel doing it? How did your child respond? Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form (below) to support your learning.

### Parent Self-Monitoring: The Engagement Skill

During Parent-Directed Playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

Using this skill, I stimulate and maintain play engagement and interaction with my child.

0 10

---

I initiate play activities that would spark my child's interest and that may be somewhat challenging, but not overly challenging.

0 10

---

I increase my own emotional intensity and include playfulness, excitement, novelty, and surprise in the play.

0 10

---

I imitate or elaborate on my child's play to encourage my child to engage further in play.

0 10

---

I initiate play by suggesting or choosing an activity and setting up appropriate toys to engage my child in play.

0 10

---

I initiate a fun play activity using, for example, one of the Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities (see Appendix) by directing my child and giving instructions on how to participate in the activity.

0 10

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I initiate and facilitate imaginary play by setting up an imaginary play scenario or by taking on an imaginary role myself.

0 10

---

I am careful not to be too directive or controlling by taking over the play completely.

0 10

---

I watch my child's reactions to my use of this skill to determine whether I should continue or stop with the activity. I do not want my child to be overwhelmed by the increased emotional intensity used in this skill.

0 10

---

I keep things fun for my child and save more formal learning for outside of playtime.

0 10

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**Let's summarize briefly here** before we go on to the Regulating Skill, since we have covered a lot of material on the Engagement Skill! Here are the important points:

- The objective of the Engagement Skill is to stimulate and maintain interactive engagement between you and your child through play.
- Some ways parents can use the Engagement Skill include imitating and elaborating on their children's play, initiating play by showing or directing their child, and structuring and facilitating imaginary play.
- We identified some tips for parents when using the Engagement Skill that include choosing interesting activities, increasing emotional intensity, and maintaining engagement in play.
- We looked at some examples of using the Engagement Skill for guiding and teaching children that included active games, games for attention and impulse control, games for thinking and social skills, and a unique way of teaching children through Structured Imaginary Play.

Now we'll continue and take a detailed look at the Regulating Skill.

## **Play Structuring Skill #2: The Regulating Skill**

### **How Do You Use This Skill?**

The objective of the Regulating Skill is to encourage regulated play by **calming and regulating your child's nervous system as needed during playtime**. During Parent-Directed Playtime, you can provide a more calming, soothing, and nurturing environment in order to regulate your child's emotional intensity and nervous system. This can be achieved by directing or redirecting your child to a more regulating activity.

The Regulating Skill can be very useful if your child gets easily overstimulated or finds it hard to maintain focus and attention.

### **What play activities are appropriate?**

What kind of play activities are helpful for developing children's self-regulation skills? What seems to be emerging from the latest developments in neuroscience is that there are certain play activities that enhance the development of a child's brain and nervous system with regards to a child's ability to self-regulate. These activities include patterned, repetitive, sensorimotor, and

expressive activities (Perry, 2006). In other words, play activities that have sensory, rhythmic, or movement components are very helpful in nervous system regulation.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 7 under the sections “Active play items,” “Sensory or ‘messy’ Play,” and “Toys for rhythm and music” for toys and materials for sensorimotor play to encourage regulation of the nervous system.*  
.....

In addition, many of the Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities outlined in the Appendix can be used to help regulate your child’s nervous system. Activities that are quieter and involve sensory or rhythmic components will help regulate the nervous system, such as making hand outlines, cotton ball touching, balloon massaging, and tasting and sniffing games, just to mention a few. Any play activities that encourage mindfulness or breathing strategies are also very good for developing children’s self-regulation skills.

## Examples of Using the Regulating Skill

### **Example #1: Hand outlines (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010, p. 527)**

You and your child are playing and you notice your child is starting to get over-aroused. You decide to use the Regulating Skill to redirect your child to a calmer and slower activity by initiating the Hand Outlines activity.

- First, you regulate your nervous system and slow your actions down. As you move towards a flat surface with paper and crayons, you would say something like this to your child: “I have a good idea for a fun game. Come over here, put your hand down flat onto the paper, and then I am going to draw around your hand to make your handprint. What colour shall I use for your hands?” Encourage your child to hold still while you trace around their hand to outline it.
- Then repeat with the other hand. You could ask, “Do you want me to use the same colour or a different colour?”
- Have your child do the same with your hands.

- You can do many things with the outlined hands. For example, each of you could draw faces at the end of each finger and name them. Decide what each finger likes to do best and draw that if you want to.
- Don't forget that as you are doing this, you are regulating your own nervous system and using calming parent behaviors to co-regulate your child's emotional system.

**Example #2: Cotton ball touch (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010, p. 536)**

You and your child are playing together and you notice your child is starting to lose focus and is getting over-active. You decide to use the Regulating Skill by redirecting your child to the Cotton Ball Touch game.

- First you regulate your own nervous system by taking some deep breaths. You then use the calming parent behaviors by slowing down your movements.
- You get your child's attention by calling their name and saying, "I have a great idea for a fun game. You will close your eyes and then I will touch you gently with this cotton ball. Then you will open your eyes and show me where I touched you. Are you ready? Sit here, be still, and close your eyes."
- Ideally, your child will follow your directions and sit quietly while you gently touch them with the cotton ball. Prompt your child to stay still by saying, "Stay still so you can feel where I touch you."
- After you touch your child, say, "Okay, open your eyes and show me where I touched you."
- Continue this game by touching your child in different places. Then reverse roles and get your child to touch you with the cotton ball.

## Tips for Using the Regulating Skill

Here are some general tips to keep in mind for using the Regulating Skill:

- Regulate your own nervous system
- Use calming parent behaviors

- Teach calming strategies ahead of time
- Regulate your child early
- Get your child's attention first

## **Regulate your own nervous system**

First of all, using the idea of “co-regulation,” regulate your own emotional and nervous system in whatever ways work best for you. Mindfulness, breathing, and movement are three common ways that adults can learn to regulate their own nervous systems (Dion, 2015). Mindfulness means being aware of your body and environment. Making describing statements about your body, feelings, thoughts, and environment can have a regulatory effect on your nervous system. Breathing techniques and patterns have also been found to be useful in supporting mindfulness and self-regulation. Finally, another way to achieve self-regulation is through movement. Physical movement, in particular rhythmic movement, has been found to regulate the nervous system.

Basically, we all benefit from anything that will help us get into a state of relaxed awareness. Engaging in yoga, mindfulness, mental imagery, movement, music, physical exercise, nature, and creative or expressive activities are examples of just some of the ways that parents can train their minds and bodies to become more emotionally grounded. The end result is that when your child's emotions escalate, you will be able to regulate your own brain and body and thus “co-regulate” your child's emotional state.

## **Co-regulation of nervous systems**

Children may “lose it,” even during playtime, by becoming very loud, hyperactive, chaotic, unfocused, and even aggressive. We say that children are dysregulated emotionally when they are in this state. Parents sometimes have difficulties when their children become overstimulated and emotions escalate. They often report that their child's emotional dysregulation will trigger an emotional reaction in themselves. This will usually lead to a negative cycle where the emotions in both parent and child will continue to escalate: the child's initial emotional outburst will trigger an emotional outburst in the parent, which will then result in the child becoming even more over-aroused. This is very normal!

In order to break this negative cycle, we need to look at the idea of emotional co-regulation between parent and child. Parents have a crucial role to play in helping their child develop a capacity to self-regulate (Rosanbalm & Murray, 2017). In healthy infant development, a parent will empathically attune to an infant's emotional state. As the parent senses and understands the infant's needs, the parent will use their own emotional state to help to regulate the infant's emotional state either up or down. The parent "co-regulates" the infant's developing nervous system. As children grow and develop, they become increasingly able to self-regulate their own nervous systems.

This is one of the key things we are learning from recent advances in neuroscience: parents are able to regulate their child's emotions and nervous system by regulating their own emotions and nervous system (Kestly, 2014). When parents use their own calm state of mind to calm their child, it is called "co-regulation." This is a VERY powerful way that parents can help their child learn to manage emotions.

## **Use calming parent behaviors**

You can use the following calming parent behaviors to help regulate your child as well:

- Slow your movements down
- Use a softer, quieter voice
- Slow your rate of speech
- Show a gentle, soft facial expression
- Sing or hum a soothing song
- Touch your child in a calming, soothing, or rhythmic manner that could include rocking, patting or tapping, rubbing, hugging, or holding. Note: Do this only if it calms and soothes your child.

## **Teach your child calming strategies**

There are many playful ways to teach your child how to calm themselves and relax. Especially important skills to teach your child are relaxation, breathing, visualization, and mindfulness skills. I have included some activities in the



Appendix that have been adapted from activities used by professionals for strengthening children's self-regulation skills and reducing anxiety:

- Tense and relax games
- Blowing bubbles
- My Special Place game
- Mindfulness activities

Teach your child these calming and regulating strategies ahead of time when your child is already in a calm or relaxed state, and practice these skills on a regular basis. That way, when your child starts to become emotionally aroused during playtime, they will have a “toolbox” of regulating and calming strategies to draw from whenever needed.

## **Regulate your child early**

Remember to regulate your child before they escalate into high levels of arousal. It is much easier to catch your child early and regulate their nervous system before they reach very high levels of arousal. Once at a very high level of emotional arousal, your child has basically lost control of their ability to think and make good choices and will find it very difficult to engage in calming activities. At this point, you may just have to “ride out the storm” as best you can until your child gains some emotional control.

## **Get your child's attention first**

Also, when your child is getting increasingly aroused emotionally, it is important to get your child's attention first in order to direct them to a calmer and more regulated state. Basically, you have to break the progression of increasing emotional arousal, and you may have to use a louder and firmer voice initially to get your child's attention in order to redirect them to a calmer activity.

## **Why Use the Regulating Skill?**

Why would you want to regulate your child's arousal level in play? Some children may be easily over-aroused and may lose focus quickly. These children may be unable to regulate their emotions and behaviors for many reasons, and the Regulating Skill can be very useful for these children. That

being said, the Regulating Skill can be important for the development of any child's self-regulation abilities. Children learn to regulate their nervous systems through calming and soothing interactions with their parents. With the Regulating Skill, you can structure and organize the play in order to keep your child from becoming over-aroused both physically and emotionally and to help develop these self-regulating abilities.

Children also need to be in an emotionally regulated state before they are able to learn things or engage in challenging tasks. Having an unregulated emotional and nervous system does not allow the cognitive, or "thinking," part of the brain to activate appropriately.

## Getting Started Activity #9: Practice Using the Regulating Skill

In this activity, you will be putting yourself into a Directive Role using the Regulating Skill. You will also be using the four Empathic Skills to attune to and connect with your child and the Engagement and Limit-Setting Skills as needed. Please review these skills outlined in Chapters 3, 5, and earlier in Chapter 8 ahead of time.

**Ahead of time:** Teach your child and practice some calming and relaxing strategies so they have several strategies to use to help calm themselves and relax when emotions start to rise (Note: Please see tense and relax, blowing bubbles, the My Special Place game, and mindfulness activities in the Appendix).

**Instructions:** Pick a time when you have some free time and your child is not overly engaged in something else. Choose an activity from the Appendix that would be calming for your child, possibly one that includes sensorimotor elements. Set up what you will need for the activity ahead of time.

Begin using the Regulating Skill by first regulating your own emotional level so that you are in a calm and grounded state. Initiate the play activity with your child by saying, for example, "I have some free time now and I have an idea for a fun game to play. Here's how it goes . . ." Explain the activity, giving clear directions to your child in a quiet, slow, and calm manner.

Notice how your child responds. Ideally, your child will engage in the activity in a focused and calm manner. To keep your child emotionally regulated, co-regulate your child by staying regulated yourself and by using calming parent behaviors.

Intersperse the Empathic Skills (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, and Encouragement Skills) throughout as you use the Regulating Skill in order to connect with and attune to your child.

If your child becomes over-aroused during the activity you are engaging in, stay regulated yourself, use calming parent behaviors and:

- Stop the activity you are doing and re-direct your child to another calming and soothing activity
- Stop the activity you are doing and use some specific calming activities that you have previously taught your child. For example, try some tense and relax games or breathing games. When your child has calmed down, you can try the initial activity again.

If your child loses interest, use the Engagement Skill and increase your level of emotional energy to encourage your child to re-engage in the activity or suggest other activities that might interest, but not over-arouse, your child.

If your child engages in unsafe or destructive behaviors, use the Limit-Setting Skill to end the behavior.

Afterwards, reflect on this activity and how you felt doing it and how your child responded. Use the Parent Self-Monitoring form (below) to support your learning.

### **Parent Self-Monitoring: The Regulating Skill**

During Parent-Directed Playtime, how are you feeling about doing this?

0 = I feel awkward and uncomfortable doing this; I am still working on this

10 = I feel comfortable doing this; doing this feels natural

When my child becomes overstimulated or over-aroused, I provide a more calming, soothing, and nurturing environment in order to regulate my child's emotional intensity and nervous system.

0 10

---

I use "co-regulation" to calm and regulate my child by regulating my own emotions and nervous system.

0 10

---

I engage in my own calming and grounding activities on my own time when away from my child, such as yoga, mindfulness activities, mental imagery activities, movement, music, physical exercise, nature walks, or creative/ expressive activities to train my mind and body to become more emotionally grounded so I can be effective at using “co-regulation” to help my child calm down and regulate.

0 10

---

I use calming parent behaviors such as using slower movements, a quieter voice, a slower rate of speech, and soft facial expressions.

0 10

---

With this skill, I initiate play activities to support the development of my child’s self-regulations skills.

0 10

---

I use this skill before my child gets over-aroused or is pushed beyond their emotional threshold.

0 10

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I have taught my child calming strategies at a time when they were relaxed and regulated so that they have a “toolbox” of strategies to use during emotionally stressful times.

0 10

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## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we looked at the Play Structuring Skills, which are Directive Role skills that make Parent-Directed Playtime distinct from Child-Directed Playtime.

When using these skills, you will be putting yourself into a Directive Role and will be structuring the play activity according to your goals and the needs of your child as follows:

- The Engagement Skill: use to stimulate interactive engagement with your child
- The Regulating Skill: use to calm and regulate your child's nervous system

The objective of these skills is to help your child develop and learn by challenging, guiding, and supporting your child in the exploration and mastery of new skills that are important for physical, intellectual, emotional, and social development.

With Parent-Directed Playtime, you will accomplish this goal by engaging with your child in fun play activities. A number of Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities are provided in the Appendix; however, parents are encouraged to find other fun activities that suit them and their children. There is a virtually unlimited number of fun play activities you can use to get involved in with your child.

With Parent-Directed Playtime, you will also be using the Empathic Skills in order to connect with your child and show understanding. Parents will be directing their children in this form of playtime; however, they will also be attuning to their children using the Empathic Skills. This will support the development of a strong parent-child relationship.

# Chapter 9:

## Step-by-Step Guidelines for Parent-Directed Playtime

Now that you are familiar with the Parent-Directed Playtime skills individually, it is time to start using these skills with your child in a playtime setting. You would prepare ahead of time so that you are free from distractions. Parent-Directed Playtime works best if you and your child are able to play one-to-one with no other children or adults around. You can have playtime with more than one child at a time, although it is less effective for your child.

It is important to be regular and consistent with your playtimes. You can engage in Parent-Directed Playtime basically any time you have a few minutes of free time. As mentioned in Chapter 6, Step-by-Step Guidelines for Child-Directed Playtime, short playtimes anywhere from five to fifteen minutes can be very effective, but longer playtimes between fifteen and thirty minutes are very appropriate too. Feel free to go as long as you and your child are enjoying the playtime.

If it is not convenient for you to play or you are distracted with other things, you can say no to your child's request to play together. Acknowledge your child's disappointment and identify a time to play that would work better for you. There is no need to feel guilty if it is not the right time to play together with your child right now.

.....  
*Please see Chapter 10 for a discussion of the play area and toys specifically for Parent-Directed Playtime.*  
.....

## Initiating Parent-Directed Playtime

To engage in Parent-Directed Playtime, you will be taking on a Directive Role and structuring the playtime the way you want in order to meet your objectives and your child's needs. This means you will have chosen the play activity and any required toys and set up the play area ahead of time.

Just as in Child-Directed Playtime, in Parent-Directed Playtime, it is important to indicate when the playtime starts and ends. Putting a time limit around playtime creates additional structure to the playtime.

Examples:

- The parent approaches their child and says, "I have twenty minutes to play now. I have an idea for something fun we can do. Let's go to your room." When the parent and child get to the play area, the play activity begins.
- The child is in an appropriate play area; the parent says, "I have five minutes to play now. I've got an idea for a fun game we can play." The parent would then structure the game to be played.
- The child runs up to their parent and asks them to play. The parent would say, "Okay, I have five minutes to play now. I have a fun game we can play. Let me explain." The parent would then begin structuring the activity.

Remember to position yourself appropriately for the playtime. Ideally, you will be at your child's level and close to your child, but not intrusively so.

## Engaging in Parent-Directed Playtime

Here is a summary of how to engage in Parent-Directed Playtime:

- Get into a Directive Role by using the Directive Role Play Structuring (Engagement and Regulating) Skills

- Use the Limit-Setting Skill if your child engages in unsafe or destructive behaviors
- Use the Empathic Skills to connect with your child whenever appropriate

## Put yourself into a Directive Role

Put yourself into a Directive Role and use the Play Structuring Skills as follows:

- The Engagement Skill: Engage your child and keep your child engaged in interactive play by stimulating and maintaining your child's interest in the playtime.
- The Regulating Skill: When your child starts to become over-aroused, structure a calmer environment and re-direct your child to a quieter activity to regulate your child's nervous system.



*Please see Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion of each of these two skills.*



## Use the Limit-Setting Skill as needed

When your child engages in, or starts to engage in, unsafe or destructive behaviors, use the Limit-Setting Skill to limit the behaviors. Here are the steps and some examples:

- Step 1: Setting the Limit: The child and the parent are rolling a hard plastic ball to each other on the floor and the child starts to throw the ball up high around the room, nearly hitting the lamp. The parent says, "This ball needs to stay on the floor when we are playing with it."
- Step 2: Providing a Warning of a Consequence: The parent says, "This ball needs to stay on the floor when we are rolling it. If you throw this ball up high again, I will put this ball away for today."
- Step 3: Enforcing the Consequence: The parent says, "Remember, I told you we have to roll this ball on the floor and if you threw this ball up high we would have to stop playing with the ball. Since you threw



this ball up high again, we have to stop playing with this ball today.”  
The parent puts the ball away, out of reach of the child, for the rest of the day.



*Please see Chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of the Limit-Setting Skill.*



## **Use the Empathic Skills**

Use the following Empathic Skills interspersed with the Play Structuring and Limit-Setting Skills throughout the playtime. The Empathic Skills will support you in developing a strong and connected relationship with your child and are especially important when you are in a Directive Role. Parents can be directive and empathic at the same time!

- The Describing Skill: Describe your child’s actions using objective Describing Statements.
- The Feelings Identification Skill: When you notice a feeling that is coming up for your child, or you notice something your child is experiencing, identify the feeling you notice or what you notice your child experiencing using a Feelings Identification Statement.
- The Paraphrasing Skill: When your child is telling you about something, paraphrase back to your child what they have told you.
- The Encouragement Skill: When you notice your child is working, or has worked hard, on something, encourage your child by focusing on their efforts and strengths. Don’t praise your child.



*Please see Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of the Empathic Skills.*



## Ending Parent-Directed Playtime

It is important to give a five-minute and/or a one-minute warning before the end of playtime. At the appropriate time, you could say something like:

- “We have five more minutes/one more minute for our playtime. Then it will be time to stop playing.”

At the end of your playtime, tell your child that playtime is finished by saying something like:

- “Our playtime is finished now. Time to stop playing.”
- “Time to stop playing together now. We can play again another time.”

Remember that there may be some resistance from your child when ending the playtime, which is completely normal. Try to keep to your specified time limit and end the playtime without significant delays, which is easier said than done. However, keeping to your time limit is helpful for your child to learn to deal with feelings of disappointment, and is also helpful for you so that you don't become resentful when playtime drags on and on!



*Please see Chapter 6 for various ways you can handle ending the playtime.*



**Congratulations!** You have just engaged in Parent-Directed Playtime with your child! Here are some questions to reflect on:

- How easy or difficult was it for your child to engage in playtime with you?
- Did your child get easily over-aroused? How did your child respond to the Regulating Skill?
- Did your child disengage from the play? How did your child respond to the Engagement Skill?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to intersperse the Empathic Skills (Describing, Feelings Identification, Paraphrasing, and Encouragement Skills) throughout the playtime?

- Did you need to use the Limit-Setting Skill? How did it work for you?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to end the playtime? What option worked best for you for ending it?
- What was the most challenging part about playtime for you?
- What did you like best about playtime?
- How did Parent-Directed Playtime compare to Child-Directed Playtime for you and your child?

It is a good idea to initially keep track of the times you engaged in Parent-Directed Playtime with your child. Note the following:

- How long did the playtime last?
- What were the main play activities you and your child engaged in?
- Was there anything important that you noticed or reflected upon?
- What things will you plan or not plan to do for your next playtime?

## Examples of Parent-Directed Playtime

### Example #1: Yo-ho-ho! Pirate playtime

Here's an example of what Parent-Directed Playtime might look like using the Engagement Skill to engage your child in an imaginary play scenario about pirates:

- You decide to facilitate an imaginary play scenario about pirates with your child. You gather up some items for this play activity first. For example, you find an old box, get out scissors and markers, and get together some sticks or blocks that could be used as fences.
- You start off by using the Engagement Skill and saying something like, "How about we set up a fort for your pirates? We can use this box as a fort. I'll cut a hole for a door and windows. We should put some fences around the fort to protect it as well."
- Ideally, your child will direct you on where to cut the door and windows, or you could engage your child into doing so by saying, "Where should I cut the door?" and "Where should the windows go?"

- You can keep using the Engagement Skill by directing your child to choose the pirates that will be in the fort by asking, “Which pirates are you going to choose to go in the fort today?”
- You can also direct your child to set up the fences and barriers around the fort by saying, “Where should we put these sticks for fences?” or “Should we build a protective wall with these blocks?”
- Ideally, your child will start engaging in setting up the pirate fort.
- You are interspersing the Empathic Skills, as well, by saying things like, “It looks like you are choosing all the blue pirates”; “Now you are building a wall over there”; “You’re working very hard at lining up all the red pirates over there”; “Now you’re adding a fence here.”
- When the fort is set up, you could keep using the Engagement Skill to initiate an imaginary play scenario by taking over one of the pirates and role-playing that character by saying, for example, “Wow, this is a fantastic fort! I’m going to look around.” Then you move your pirate around the fort saying, “Nobody will get in! I will stand guard on the roof” and moving your pirate to the roof.
- Ideally, this will prompt your child to take up a pirate character and start role-playing this character. Keep using the Engagement Skill by role-playing your character.
- As the story develops, you may decide to add to the plot by saying something like, “Oh no, I think I hear some bad pirates coming!” Ideally, your child will add their own ideas on how the story unfolds.

**Example #2: Tense and relax playtime  
(adapted from Kendall et al., 1992)**

Here’s an example of Parent-Directed Playtime using the Regulating Skill to support your child in regulating their emotional arousal level:

- Your child is pretending to be a pirate and you notice she is becoming increasingly excited and agitated, and starting to use the sword in inappropriate ways. You decide to use the Regulating Skill and choose a tense and relax activity (see Appendix) to regulate your child’s nervous system.

- You first regulate your own nervous system by doing what works for you to become regulated emotionally.
- You get your child's attention and say something like, "I have a fun game. Pretend there is a bad pirate coming and you need to hide. Now go into this cave" as you direct your child to go under a table.
- Then say, "Oh no, here comes the bad pirate." Get your child to pull her shoulders up to her ears and push her head down into her shoulders. Also, get your child to pull up her knees tightly to her chest. Have her hold that position tight for five seconds while you count (in your head) and say out loud, "Don't let even a tiny piece of yourself show outside the cave." Get your child to notice how tight her neck, shoulders, and legs feel. After five seconds say, "Okay, relax, the bad pirate is gone, you can come out of the cave and just relax and feel that nice warm sunshine." Tell your child to notice how much better it feels to be relaxed than to be all tight.
- Then say to your child, "Oh no, here comes the bad pirate again, and he's not watching where he's going! He doesn't see you lying there in the grass and he is about to step on your stomach! Don't move, you don't have time to get out of the way. Make your stomach really hard. Tighten up your stomach muscles really tight!" Get your child to hold that position tight for five seconds while you count. Get your child to harden her stomach so it won't get hurt if the bad pirate steps on her. After counting to five, say, "Okay relax, it looks like the bad pirate is going the other way." Get your child to let her stomach relax, go as soft as it can, and notice how good it feels to relax.
- You can repeat either or both of these scenarios.

**Example #3: Let's play the pillow game! (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010, p. 542)**

Here's an example of Parent-Directed Playtime using both the Engagement Skill and Regulating Skill in a balancing pillows game to support not only your child's balancing skills, but also listening and self-regulation skills.

- You decide to use the Engagement Skill to initiate the Balancing Pillows Game with your child. You playfully and enthusiastically get

his attention by saying something like, “Let’s play for a few minutes. I have a fun game for you.”

- Start with giving clear directions for the game: “I am going to put a pillow on your head and then take my hands away so that you are balancing the pillow on your head without holding it. Let me show you what I mean.”
- Then you demonstrate by balancing the pillow on your head yourself.
- Next, you coach your child to stand quietly while you carefully place the pillow on his head and get it to balance.
- You would slowly take your hands away and allow the pillow to balance, and at the same time you would be praising your child for sitting still and balancing the pillow by himself, saying, “Good job! You’re doing it, I’ve taken my hands away!” Express pride and happiness as you step away.
- You increase the difficulty, saying, “Now I’m going to put another pillow on top,” and repeat this step. However, you notice your child is having difficulties balancing and is starting to get frustrated, so you decide to use the Regulating Skill to help your child calm and regulate his nervous system.
- You take some deep breaths yourself and start using calming parent behaviors.
- You then encourage your child to use the blowing bubbles breathing exercise that you and he have practiced recently (see Appendix). You get your child to take some deep breaths, imagine slowly blowing a bubble, and relax. You also provide extra support by helping to balance the pillows as your child masters the skill.
- You could keep on going with this game using the Engagement and Regulating Skills by adding more pillows, getting your child to add pillows onto your head, or balancing pillows on a different body part, such as on feet up in the air. Make up your own fun game with pillows!
- Don’t forget to use the Empathic Skills as well by saying things like, “Looks like you want me to put another pillow on your head”; “You’re

feeling very proud of being able to balance three pillows on your head”; “Now you are walking with the pillows on your head”; “You really like playing this game.”

- Remember to have fun together!

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we looked at how to hold a Parent-Directed Playtime session with your child. Because you will be structuring the playtime using the Play Structuring Skills, you will decide on the activity ahead of time and make sure any toys or play materials are ready prior to playtime.

For Parent-Directed Playtime, you indicate to your child that playtime is starting and then you direct your child to your chosen play activity. The goal is to initiate and maintain interactive engagement with your child in the play activity. You will be in a Directive Role using the Play Structuring Skills to do this, keeping your child engaged and interested in the play, but also regulating your child’s emotional arousal level.

The Empathic Skills are used to connect with your child to show acceptance and understanding.

The Limit-Setting Skill is used to prevent any unsafe or destructive behaviors.

You will give warnings for the end of playtime and indicate when it is time to stop playing and will end the playtime without significant delays.

# Chapter 10:

## The Play Area and Toys for Parent-Directed Playtime

In Parent-Directed Playtime, parents structure the play activity for their children, so that means you will need to think ahead of time about what you want to focus on during playtime with your child. Do you want to support your child in developing self-regulation skills? Do you want to facilitate imaginary play? Do you want to help your child with memory or attention skills? Do you want to help your child learn that interactive play is fun? You will choose a play activity and play materials that are appropriate for what you want to focus on during playtime and have the play area set up ahead of time with toys and other materials that you will need.

### The Play Area for Parent-Directed Playtime

Think ahead of time about how you want the play area to be set up. Do you need a clear area on the floor to set up something? Do you need a table and chairs? Do you need a bit of cleared space for an active game? Do you need a “cozy corner” where there are some soft pillows and a place to relax? Do you need specific toys or props for your play activity? Be sure to have all necessary materials ready so you can remain focused on your child when the activity begins.



.....

*Here's something to keep in mind!*

*In Parent-Directed Playtime, aim for minimal distractions! Although you will want to have a child-friendly space with the toys or items chosen for your play activity, you also do not want to have too many other distractions nearby since you want your child to engage in the play activity you have chosen and interact with you during playtime. For Parent-Directed Playtime, it may help to have only the toys and materials necessary for your play activity available and to put away other toys that may be too distracting or stimulating. This is different from Child-Directed Playtime, where you would provide a variety of various toys that are accessible for your child to choose from.*

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## Toys for Parent-Directed Playtime

Toys used for Child-Directed Playtime (see Chapter 7) can also be used for Parent-Directed Playtime. In addition, because Parent-Directed Playtime is more structured and directive than Child-Directed Playtime, there are additional categories of toys that are more appropriate for Parent-Directed Playtime than Child-Directed Playtime. I have compiled a list of toy categories for Parent-Directed Playtime based on their primary area of focus. Choose toys to match your goals or learning objectives for your child. Please remember that toys suitable for children over three years old are not suitable for children three years and under. The toy categories are as follows:

- Toys for active play
- Construction and building toys
- Toys for self-regulation
- Toys for imaginary play
- Art and craft activities
- Board and card games
- Educational or enrichment games

## **Toys for active play**

Active play focuses on the development of physical abilities, such as locomotor, balance, object-handling, and proprioceptive skills. It encompasses both gross and fine motor skills. Active play also supports many other areas of development. For example, skills for following rules, self-regulation, and strategic thinking can also be important in active play. Active play can happen indoors or outdoors and can involve balls or sports equipment. For Parent-Directed Playtime, there are generally rules or instructions to follow for a particular activity. Please see Chapter 7 for some examples of active play items.

## **Construction and building toys**

This category would include any toy that needs to be built or put together and would support the development of fine motor skills. The activity often includes various pieces that come in a variety of materials, shapes, colours, or sizes. For Parent-Directed Playtime, these toys can be put together in a specific way according to directions to produce a suggested product. This will support skills in problem-solving and following instructions or plans. These toys are also wonderful for encouraging imaginative and creative play because they can be put together in many different ways. With these toys, parents can encourage their children in this type of play. Please see Chapter 7 for examples of toys in this category.

## **Toys for self-regulation**

Sensory play, where children are able to use their hands to feel different textures, is very important for the development of self-regulations skills. Please see Chapter 7 for how to set up a sensory or “messy” play area.

Play that includes rhythm and movement is also very important for the development of a child’s nervous system. Music, dancing, and drumming are all excellent motor activities that involve some kind of patterned rhythm, which is important for the development of self-regulation skills. Please see Chapter 7 for examples of toys and items that would support rhythm and movement.

## Toys for imaginary play

In Parent-Directed Playtime, parents can encourage their children's imaginary play by structuring a play scenario and engaging in the imaginary play with their child. In pretend play, parents can help children practice familiar roles, such as preparing food, caring for others, or going to school. Parents can also help their children experiment with novel situations and new roles, such as pretending to be a super-hero, being away from home, or dealing with a surprising or even uncomfortable situation.

Toys that encourage imaginary and pretend play would include small or miniature people or animals, small or miniature vehicles or buildings for the miniature toys, real-life toys such as toy kitchen or medical items, and dress-up items. Please see Chapter 7 for a detailed list of these types of toys for pretend or imaginary play. Also, please see the Appendix under "Imaginary Play Scenarios" for ideas on setting up this type of play.

Don't forget, toys for pretend or imaginary play do not necessarily need to look realistic. For example, a box could represent a boat, or blocks could represent miniature pieces of furniture.

## Art and craft activities

There is an almost unlimited number of art and craft activities available for children. Many children love to make and create things using a variety of materials. This kind of play supports fine motor skills as well as thinking, planning, expressive, and creative skills. Younger children may need more support from parents when they are learning new skills. Please see Chapter 7 for some ideas for basic art supplies.

For Parent-Directed Playtime, there are many art and craft activities for specific projects that children enjoy as well. These activities generally include instructions to follow to achieve a certain product. Make sure the art or craft activity is age-appropriate for your child, otherwise your child will become overly frustrated, or you will end up doing it all yourself! Also, don't focus too much on your child perfecting a certain product, as this can lead to perfectionism. Support your child in mastering tasks if they are difficult, but don't forget to allow your child to use their creative skills to create their own designs and products.

## **Board and card games**

Board and card games can generally be categorized as cooperative games, competitive games of luck/chance, or competitive games of strategy/skill. Competitive games are generally more suited to children six years or older; however, there are some competitive games of luck/chance and cooperative games that are suitable for younger children (four to five years old).

Competitive games of strategy/skill are generally meant for more mature children, since younger children are not cognitively or emotionally mature enough to engage in these more challenging skill-based competitive games. Please remember to choose age-appropriate games to maximize fun and minimize frustration!

Board and card games can be appropriate for Parent-Directed Playtime. These games are very entertaining for most children, and also have a particular focus on supporting important skills such as memory, thinking skills, cooperation and teamwork, taking turns, following rules, playing fairly, and winning and losing.

## **Educational or enrichment games**

These toys have specific educational or learning objectives, even though I believe all toys are educational for children! Some examples of these kind of toys include science and STEM activities, brainteasers, and puzzles. When these activities are used in Parent-Directed Playtime, parents need to be aware that they are putting themselves into more of a teaching role. Some children, however, engage more easily if they are learning something, so if your child is interested in a specific topic, you can use this to your advantage! When using these toys during Parent-Directed Playtime, please remember, however, to keep things playful, fun, novel, and even surprising.

## **Books**

Books are generally not appropriate for Parent-Directed Playtime. Although reading to your child is a highly recommended activity, it should be done at times outside of Parent-Directed Playtime. When you read to your child, your child is in more of a passive or listening role, which does not result in interactive play between you and your child. Workbooks or activity books

fall into the same category as well and should be saved for times outside of Parent-Directed Playtime.

### **Electronic games, TV/videos or any type of screen activity**

These activities are not recommended for Parent-Directed Playtime because they do not facilitate face-to-face interaction between parent and child.

## **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, we looked at a number of toys and play activities that would be suitable for Parent-Directed Playtime. Toys suitable for Child-Directed Playtime are also suited to Parent-Directed Playtime. In addition to these toys, toys and activities that have rules, directions, or instructions would also be suitable for Parent-Directed Playtime, as one of the goals for this style of play is for parents to guide and support their children in developing new skills. Parents will use these toys and activities to both engage their children in playful interactions, regulate their children's emotional levels, and teach their children new skills. As with Child-Directed Playtime, in Parent-Directed Playtime, any activity involving electronics or screens is not appropriate.

# Part IV

## Advanced Playtime

# Chapter II:

## Understanding Children's Play

Now comes The Big Question! When should you “jump in” and structure the play and when should you “back off” and let your child lead the play? In other words, when do you take on a Directive Role, as in Parent-Directed Playtime, and when do you take on a Nondirective Role, as in Child-Directed Playtime? These are very tricky questions, and each playtime is unique. So, to get some ideas on how to answer the above question, let's first look in more detail at how children play and what they are accomplishing in play.

### Understanding Children's Play

Children play for fun and most children will engage happily in play activities. Children also use play to express themselves (Landreth, 2012). Since language is developing in childhood, children are more comfortable expressing themselves symbolically through play rather than by verbally discussing things. When children can play freely, it allows them to reveal, work through, and understand various situations or problems that they have experienced in real life. Children may begin to express some of their deeper feelings and conflicts during playtime, especially if their parents provide a safe and accepting environment.

This is why play is often called the language of childhood. When adults observe children's play, they can get a better understanding of children's

perspectives and feelings. This is important, because children need to be able to trust that their parents understand them.

## What are Play Themes?

Play therapists will often talk about children’s “play themes” as a way of understanding what children are trying to communicate to adults (VanFleet, 2000). Play themes will arise when children are given the freedom to direct and choose how the play unfolds, as in child-directed play.

Play themes can be identified by the way children play and consist of overarching ideas of what the play is about. Play themes can be observed as the recurrence of certain events or topics in a child’s play and emerge as patterns of play that are repeated over time. They capture the main issues children express in play.

Play themes can also be defined as segments of a child’s play that seem to be meaningful for that child. Play themes are often related to real-life situations that a child has experienced; however, children generally have little awareness of how the toys and activities they choose for play relate to their real-life situations. Emotionally significant experiences for children can be expressed safely through play, where feelings can be transferred onto play objects. Through play, children can distance themselves from the otherwise overwhelming emotions of real life. Taking advantage of the therapeutic powers of play, children often need only to use their imaginations to play out different scenarios in order for them to gain a better understanding of real life events and to learn and grow in healthy ways (Schaefer, 1993).

Some signs that indicate a possible play theme would be when your child:

- Plays repeatedly with the same toys or activities
- Is absorbed in and focused on what they are doing
- Plays with something for an extended period of time

With a play theme, the play will seem similar even though the toys used might be different. There may also be an overarching emotional tone within the play theme. Play themes can be repeated within one playtime, or they can be repeated from one playtime to the next.



## Common Play Themes

The framework for common play themes observed in childhood is often based on the child development literature of pioneers such as Jean Piaget, Erik Erickson, and John Bowlby. Erickson's model of psychosocial development (see, for example, Erikson, 1986) especially has been useful for identifying play themes.

Helen Benedict has also been another pioneer in the development of the categorization and meaning of children's play themes. I like to look at children's play themes loosely based on Benedict's (2002) categorization of the thematic content of play as follows:

- Power and aggressive themes
- Control and safety themes
- Nurturance and family themes
- Mastery themes

Most common play themes for children are found within these groups. Let's look at each of these groups a little more closely to get a better understanding of them.

### Power and aggressive themes

Benedict (2002) states that themes in this group are characterized by aggression or the assertion of power in some form. Here are two common categories for this theme:

- Good character/team vs. bad character/team play
- Aggressor-victim play

#### **Good character vs. bad character play**

This type of play is defined by Benedict (2002) as aggressive play where there is a clear good vs. bad character or team component. Children may be playing out concepts of "big-little" or "good-bad" with this theme. They are also learning about and managing angry and aggressive feelings. Superheroes, police, knights, or soldiers may be involved fighting against "bad" others/enemies. For example:

- Your child wants you to pretend, with her, to be one of the “good” pirates fighting back imaginary “bad” pirates.
- Your child enjoys setting up the dinosaur figures so that they are on “teams” that seem to be “good” and “bad.” There are frequent one-on-one fights between the good and bad dinosaurs to see who is the winner. Your child keeps track of the winners and losers as the battles continue.

### **Aggressor-victim play**

Benedict (2002) states that this type of play is aggressive play where there is a clear aggressor and clear victim without the element of good-bad. Here, a powerful character overcomes a weaker character. Children may be experimenting with powerful and weak roles and what it feels like to be a strong aggressor or a powerless victim. As with good character vs. bad character play, they may also be learning how to manage angry and aggressive feelings. Additionally, they may be learning what it feels like to overcome powerlessness. For example:

- Your child has a big lion attack baby kitten. The lion aggressively knocks the kitten out of the dollhouse.
- Your child is pretending to be a powerful superhero and attacks you, and you are supposed to be a weak superhero who has lost their power.

### **Control and safety themes**

With this type of play, children are experimenting with dangerous or frightening situations in the safe environment of play where they are able to take control of the situations (Benedict, 2002). They are learning about managing feelings of fear and anxiety. Here are some common categories within this theme:

- Broken and fixing play
- Messing, cleaning, and sorting play
- Danger play
- Safety play

## **Broken and fixing play**

Broken play is defined by Benedict (2002) as play where a character or thing is broken, sick, or hurt and needs to be fixed, and fixing play as play where something broken is fixed. Children playing this theme may be learning to manage feelings of anxiety about the safety of self or others. They may also be expressing a desire to make things better. For example:

- Your child uses a toy medical kit to give his stuffed dog a check-up and fix the dog's "broken" leg by wrapping a bandage around it.
- Your child knocks over the house she has built with blocks.

## **Messing, cleaning, and sorting play**

This as any play activity that involves messing, cleaning, or sorting things (Benedict, 2002). Children may be experimenting with the concepts of chaos and establishing a sense of order. For example:

- Your child decides to dump and mix up her collection of toy gemstones, then she sorts them out into different categories.
- Your child has just played out a battle with his superheroes, who are all in a messy pile on the floor. Your child is now sorting out the superheroes and lining them up on the floor.

## **Danger play**

Danger play happens when a character is endangered and is in an unsafe situation (Benedict, 2002). Children may be experimenting with the concept of danger and learning to manage feelings of confusion, fear, and anxiety. For example:

- Your child has put a princess on the edge of a tower on the castle and has made her balance precariously on the edge of the castle wall.
- Your child has set up a town using blocks for buildings and miniature cars and people. Your child then sets up a wildfire, using red paper scraps, that is advancing on the town.

## Safety play

Safety play is defined by Benedict (2002) as play that happens when a child takes control of a dangerous situation in play. Here, children are learning about managing fear and anxiety. Benedict (2002) breaks this type of play into various forms:

- Containing play happens when something dangerous is being contained and kept inside or outside. For example:
  - Your child has been playing good vs. bad character and the good character has caught the bad character. The bad character is put in a jail made out of an empty box that can be closed securely with a lid.
- Protective play happens when a character is being protected and kept safe from danger. For example:
  - Your child is pretending to be a mother lion and has built a high wall of pillows and cushions around herself for protection from other dangerous lions.
- Rescue play happens when a character that has been in danger is rescued. For example:
  - Your child has made a princess fall off the edge of a castle and then has a flying horse come to rescue her before she falls to the ground.
- Escape play happens when a character that has been in danger escapes. For example:
  - Your child has made his Batman character get captured by the monster character and put in a dungeon. He then has his Batman character escape from the dungeon and fly to safety.

## Nurturance and family themes

Themes of family and relationships are very common in children's play. Benedict (2002) identifies some common categories within this theme:

- Constancy play
- Separation and reunion play

- Nurturing play
- Self-nurturing play
- Store and shopping play

### **Constancy play**

This category identified by Benedict (2002) includes play activities that establish a sense of identity or constancy of child, parent, or object. Hiding is a way of maintaining connection from a distance. Finding is a way of affirming constancy. For example:

- Hide-and-seek, peek-a-boo, tag, hiding and finding things, naming games, and mirror play are all examples of constancy play.

### **Separation and reunion play**

Benedict (2002) states separation play is whenever a character leaves or separates from a good or wise character, and reunion play includes reunions after separation. Children may play this theme to process feelings around separation from and reunion with parents, families, or other important people. They are learning to manage feelings of sadness, confusion, and anxiety. For example:

- Your child is very interested in setting up a school scenario where he has the child character in a family leave their home and go to school. He sets up the family at home, then has the mommy character take the child to school and leave. The child character stays at the school and participates in the school day, then the mommy character comes back to pick up the child character and they go back home together.
- Your child wants you to be the daddy and pretend to go to work. Then she wants you to come back home again and make dinner and put her to bed.

### **Nurturing play**

This play involves positive nurturing activities such as caring for, giving things to, feeding, holding, rocking, soothing, and comforting others (Benedict, 2002). Children may play this theme to experiment with and learn about

giving and accepting care, nurturance, and feelings of love and affection. For example:

- Your child sets up a farm and groups the animals into family groups with the baby animals close to the adult animals. She puts out water and food for the animals.
- Your child holds, cuddles, rocks, and sings to a baby doll. They wrap the baby in a blanket, put the baby to bed, and tell you to be quiet now because it is nap time.

Benedict (2002) states also that sometimes children may play a “failed” nurturing theme where one character withholds nurturance from another, or one character is needing nurturance but does not get it. For example:

- Your child has a stuffed monkey character get and eat all the food, and the other characters get nothing.

### **Self-nurturing play**

This type of play is defined by Benedict (2002) as play that involves the child regressing to an earlier developmental level in play and engaging in baby activities. Children may play this theme as a way of self-nurturing. For example:

- Your child pretends to be a baby and curls up with a pillow and blanket and makes baby noises or talks “like a baby.” He pretends he is helpless and cannot get up.

### **Store and shopping play**

Benedict (2002) defines this as play that would include any activity that involves setting up a store and characters going shopping or acting as shopkeeper. This play may be about fulfilling needs and feeling in control of things. For example:

- Your child gets out the toy cash register and tells you to go shopping at the “store” for toy food items by filling up a basket. Your child then directs you to come to check-out at the cash register and to pay her with the play money. She then tells you to take your groceries home.

## Mastery themes

With this type of play, children are exploring and learning about their world. They may be building or making something, doing some kind of a physical task, or mastering some skill or ability (Benedict, 2002). Here, children may be experimenting with the concepts of autonomy, independence, industriousness, and competence, which are all very healthy and normal developmental themes. For example:

- Your child catches a ball that is thrown to her.
- Your child is trying to put fences together, but it is difficult and he fails at the first couple of attempts. However, he is persistent and keeps working on the task, and on the third try, he is successful and expresses satisfaction.
- Your child uses blocks to set up a “machine” that balances stones and then drops them into a container when released. This involves some trial and error, but she is eventually successful and happy with her creation.



*Here’s something I think you might find interesting:*

*Benedict (2002) identifies a type of play called doing-undoing play; this is a kind of play where one theme is followed by another opposite theme. This type of play is very common and may mean children are trying to understand and make sense of confusing situations in the real world. Benedict (2002) identifies some examples as:*

- *Aggression followed by nurturance*
- *Rescue followed by new danger*
- *Taking away followed by giving*
- *Breaking followed by fixing*
- *Messing followed by cleaning*



**To summarize briefly**, so far we’ve discussed some of the major themes seen in children’s play, but this is often an area about which parents have many questions. Let’s turn now to answering some of the most common of these questions:

- What does my child’s play mean?

- Why does my child repeat play themes?
- What about fantastical play?
- What about “negative” or aggressive play themes?
- What about death play?
- What would unhealthy play themes look like?

## Parents’ Questions About Play Themes

### What does my child’s play mean?

The way your child plays can give you information regarding your child’s real life experiences. Parents can understand their children’s inner emotional experiences through the themes represented in play. Being able to understand play themes means that you will become more attuned and better able to respond empathically on an emotional level to your child in playtime.

To get a better understanding of your child’s play themes, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there repeated segments in your child’s play?
- What were the feelings that you noticed coming up in the play?
- Can you identify one or more play themes in your child’s play?
- Do you think the play is related to your child’s real-life experiences?  
How so?

It is very important to keep in mind that the play themes that arise in your child’s play have many meanings (VanFleet, 2000). We cannot interpret exactly the meaning of a play theme for a particular child. There are many possible meanings for a particular way a child plays with toys and it is important for parents to keep an open mind about meanings of their children’s play.

Many parents report having positive feelings during play with their children. They are beginning to connect on an emotional level and to better understand their children’s experiences and perceptions. However, sometimes playtimes can trigger negative emotional reactions for parents (VanFleet, 1994). Parents may not like the way their children are playing, especially if the play is repetitive or aggressive, and may worry that this type of play



happens regularly. Or, they may feel threatened or anxious by what the play seems to mean, especially if it reflects difficult or unhappy situations. These are very common concerns that can arise for any parent.

Children enjoy setting up play scenarios about families. Play that involves characters that represent moms, dads, children, and babies is very common. Children may, however, put the families in difficult or uncomfortable situations, leading parents to worry that this is their children's perspective of their own family. For example, your child may set up a scenario where a family goes for a car ride and the car tips over, spilling the family out onto the road. You may worry that your child feels that your family is not safe. But it is very important not to jump to conclusions! There are many other possible meanings for this play scenario. For example, your child may be experimenting with the concepts of danger and safety and learning about managing feelings of anxiety, or your child may be experimenting and learning about the concepts and feelings of chaos and disorder.

Parents may also worry about what their children's play means in relation to their role as parents. For example, if a child puts a daddy doll into the role of a bad-guy, the father may worry that his child views him as being bad and then may feel defensive, frustrated, threatened, upset, incompetent, or hurt. Remember, though, it is important to see the play in the context of the child's real life. Perhaps this child has been watching or reading about superheroes. Perhaps this child is experimenting with feelings of power and control and with different roles that people can take on. Please remember, it is essential not to jump to conclusions such as that the child sees the father as a bad guy! There can be a real danger of misinterpreting play themes.

Play themes are inferences or hypotheses, not facts, of what adults think is meaningful for children based on children's patterns of play. You need to think of several different possible meanings for a particular play segment or theme because you cannot interpret exactly what the theme means to your child, and there are many possible meanings for a particular play theme.



***Please remember this important point!***

***A single instance of a specific play event played by a child would not be considered a play theme. It is important to allow time for***

*patterns of play to emerge as play themes. Parents cannot draw conclusions from a single play incident or event.*



## Why does my child repeat play themes?

Some parents may worry that their child's playtimes are becoming boring or are not useful when play themes are repeated over and over. For example, your child may be repeatedly playing themes where a bad monster keeps attacking another character, or your child may be playing out scenarios where a character is constantly being put in dangerous situations.

Play functions in various ways to help children make negative experiences more understandable, to reduce anxiety and emotional arousal, to restore personal power and control, and to increase self-confidence. Play can be seen as an externalization in order to establish safety and distance from difficult real life events (Schaefer, 1993).

It's important to remember that repeated play scenarios and themes can mean that your child is working through something significant, re-organizing some part of a past difficult or troublesome experience, and learning to understand and cope with a problem, feeling, or situation in real life (Gil, 2017). Although the play may seem repetitive and boring to you, if your child is engaging with interest in and focus on the play, this play is likely meaningful for your child. Your child could be taking advantage of the therapeutic powers of play by working through something in order to gain a better understanding of it.

Although some repetitive play can be unhealthy (see below for characteristics of unhealthy play themes), most repetitive play is beneficial for children. Here are some characteristics of healthy repetitive play that have been identified by Gil (2017):

- Your child is focused and eager and may be excited to pick up where they left off as they begin repeating the play again. There is evidence of a release of tension during play.
- The play story changes, even if subtly, over time. The story becomes less rigid and more varied and complex. Characters may be added or deleted. The sequence of play may change.
- The endings or outcomes of the play may change.

The endings to a play scenario can suggest how children are resolving difficulties. When children can play out a satisfactory ending, such as when there is a sense of completeness at the end of a play scenario, playing through a difficult story can strengthen a child's sense of mastery and weaken the negative feelings present.

## What about fantastical play?

Fantastical, or fantasy, play is often used interchangeably with pretend or imaginary play. But what is fantastical play? Let's look at what "fantastical" means to start with:

- Strange and unrealistic
- Imaginary, made-up, make-believe
- Incredible, preposterous, absurd, impractical, nonsensical

Children will enjoy engaging in pretend or imaginary play and will do so in various ways. Pretend play can involve play activities that vary across a wide spectrum of reality, from real to non-real or fantastical. Some children prefer to engage in pretend play that is more representational and involves more realistic or everyday experiences, like pretending to be a teacher or doctor or having a tea party. Some children prefer more fantastical play and engaging in fantastical thinking, resulting in pretend play that involves unrealistic or impossible experiences, such as pretending to be a superhero or unicorn or casting a magic spell.

Some children are more fantasy-oriented in their play, and others are more reality-oriented, and this seems to be a stable individual difference throughout childhood. In one recent study, researchers looked at differentiating children's fantasy play according to the extent to which it is truly fantastical, or violates known physical principles, by developing a four-point fantasy orientation scale (Bunce & Woolley, 2021):

- 0 = reality oriented: (e.g. playing basketball, building something according to directions)
- 1 = possible fantasy: pretend play that conforms to laws of reality; representational pretend play (e.g. having a pretend tea party; pretending to go to the doctor; playing school)

- 2 = improbable fantasy: theoretically possible but very improbable; (e.g. pretending an alligator is hiding under the bed; pretending to be an astronaut)
- 3 = impossible fantasy: normal restrictions imposed by reality do not apply (e.g. pretending to be a unicorn, pretending to be a wizard, being invisible)

The researchers were studying whether creativity was related to fantasy orientation and concluded that more research needs to be done in this area (Bunce & Woolley, 2021). However, I think it is very interesting to see how children's fantasy play can be differentiated.

Some parents may worry that fantasy stories or play could confuse young children. Other parents may discount fantasy play as silly or not having any serious purpose or value. So, should children stay away from fantasy play? Recent research suggests “no.” Engaging with fantasy can stimulate imagination, improve vocabulary, and may help children develop better executive functioning and self-regulation skills (Pierucci et al., 2013). Although preschoolers do make some errors in judgement about what is real and make-believe, and it may be difficult at times for parents to differentiate between made-up stories and events that really happen, preschoolers are generally not easily confused and can understand that fantasy scenarios can't happen in real life.

Researchers believe that fantasy-oriented play helps children because fantasy play allows children to engage in complex tasks and thinking that are unlike those they encounter in real-life everyday experiences (Pierucci et al., 2013).

### **What about “negative” or aggressive play themes?**

Sometimes, your child's play may appear very negative. For example, there may be lots of fighting between different groups or characters may be put in dangerous situations, hurt, or even killed. These themes of aggression and danger are very typical and normal in children's play (VanFleet, 1994). Children use play to gain a better understanding of confusing and complex real life situations that they are beginning to be exposed to.

It is very common for parents to feel uncomfortable with negative or aggressive play and they may worry that allowing this type of play will

encourage aggressive and dangerous behaviors in their children. Parents often ask, “Is it okay for me to let my child play like this? Shouldn’t I be restricting this type of play?”

I learned much about aggressive play in children from Lisa Dion, a well-known and highly regarded play therapist who created a model of play therapy known as “Synergetic Play Therapy” (Dion, 2015). Her model promotes the understanding of aggression from the perspective of the nervous system, that is, understanding children’s hyper (sympathetic) and hypo (parasympathetic) states.

One thing that is important for parents to realize is that aggressive or dangerous play themes are not the same as violent, unsafe, or destructive behaviors in children. Themes of aggression and danger are common and normal in children. This type of play is important for children because by playing out aggressive or difficult feelings and themes, they learn constructive ways to express and manage these difficult feelings.

Problems with aggressive play in children can arise if this type of play is not monitored and supervised to prevent unsafe, hurtful or destructive behaviors. Aggressive play that is supervised with limits in place to prevent unsafe, hurtful, or destructive behaviors can be very beneficial for children and help them learn what aggressive feelings feel like and how to manage them. If aggressive feelings or themes are prohibited, children may then express these feelings in inappropriate ways.

### **Handling aggressive themes during playtime**

During playtime, you could be asked by your child to be a participant in aggressive play, such as engaging in a play sword fight together. Your child may also play out scenarios that have aggressive themes where you are in the observer role. For example, your child may set up a battle scenario with their pirate characters and make them fight against each other.

When your child engages in aggressive play themes during playtime, one of your goals would be to support your child in exploring aggression safely without encouraging it in the real world. To do this, parents can encourage their children to regulate their nervous systems during aggressive play in order to learn to manage the emotional energy that is aggression in the real world (Dion, 2015). When we help children notice these aggressive feelings

and to experience and manage them rather than avoid them, we are helping them to develop healthy patterns in their nervous systems.

What does “regulated” mean? From research in the field of neuroscience, being emotionally regulated does not necessarily mean being “calm” (Dion, 2015). You can be emotionally regulated and still feel angry, sad, or scared. Being regulated means your emotional brain has not taken over and you are still capable of being mindful and using your rational or “thinking” brain.

### **How do I help my child regulate?**

In Parent-Directed Playtime, the objective of the Regulating Skill is to support your child in regulating their nervous system during playtime. Two important strategies used in the Regulating Skill are to regulate your own nervous system and to use calming parent behaviors.

Your ability to stay regulated will help your child stay regulated. Being mindful of yourself, engaging in deep breathing, and moving rhythmically are all ways you can regulate your own nervous system in order to “co-regulate” your child’s nervous system during playtime. Calming parent behaviors, such as slowing your movements down and speaking more slowly and quietly, are also ways to regulate your child’s nervous system.

An important point to mention here is that you can also regulate your child’s emotional level during Child-Directed Playtime, even though you would not be using the Regulating Skill as in Parent-Directed Playtime. If you choose to regulate your child’s emotional level during Child-Directed Playtime, you would do it by regulating your own nervous system and using calming parent behaviors. By doing this, you are remaining in a Nondirective Role, but you are also indirectly encouraging your child to regulate through your own regulating behaviors. Being able to regulate your child’s nervous system during Child-Directed Playtime can be very useful if your child is playing out aggressive themes.

### **Play fighting**

Here are some tips, some suggested by Dion (2015), for when your child wants to engage in a play fight together, such as a pillow fight or sword fight with foam swords or pool noodles:

- Set up limits for unsafe or destructive behaviors, such as no hurting the other person, tapping on arms or legs only, or no making contact

above the neck. Use the Limit-Setting Skill to prevent unsafe or destructive behaviors.

- Identify a “stop” or “time-out” cue that both the parent and child can use and must respect.
- Don’t be too competitive or too good; although your child will enjoy some challenge, don’t overwhelm your child. Let your child win!
- Lose your power gradually and play it so that your child can take your power away without too much difficulty.
- Pretend to feel helpless, like you can’t protect yourself, or that you are not strong enough.
- Exaggerate your feelings without frightening your child. Pretend to be hurt, scared, or angry in a comical manner.
- If your child tells you to hit them, get your child to tell you exactly where and how to hit and then do it very gently.
- Don’t forget to regulate your own nervous system!

### **Observing aggressive play themes**

During playtime, your child may set up play scenarios that have aggressive themes, such as battles, fights, or a character getting hurt. For example, there may be a battle between the “good” and “bad” knights, a baby doll may get thrown to the ground, or a shark puppet may eat another puppet. Here are some tips for what you can do when your child is playing out aggressive themes:

- Use the Describing Skill by describing in an objective way what you observe your child doing. Remain neutral without making judgements on what is happening in the play. Refrain from questioning your child. For example, when your child has a shark puppet eat up all the smaller puppets you could say, “That shark is eating the puppy, and now the shark is eating that little kitten. Oh, and I see the shark is eating the turtle now. The shark is eating lots of creatures.”
- Use the Feelings Identification Skill to identify feelings that you are observing through the toys. For example, when your child has two dinosaurs aggressively fighting, you could say, “It looks like that little

dinosaur is really angry at that big dinosaur” or “I can see that the big dinosaur is feeling very frightened.”

- Paraphrase back to your child what they are telling you is happening in the play.
- Avoid expressions that encourage aggression. For example, avoid saying, “Get him!” or “Hit him hard!”
- Use the Limit-Setting Skill for unsafe or destructive behaviors. For example, set limits for throwing toys, hitting, or kicking. Remember, aggressive themes and content in the play is okay, but aggressive, unsafe, and destructive behaviors by your child are not okay.
- Remember to regulate your own nervous system.

### **Redirect to a different activity**

It’s so important that parents don’t shut down their children’s need to express themselves by playing out aggressive themes during playtime. Children learn about managing aggressive feelings through play. However, there may be times when parents want and need to redirect their children to a quieter or different activity in order to support their children in developing self-regulation skills, as is the case in Parent-Directed Playtime. One of your goals may be to monitor your child’s emotional arousal during playtime and to keep your child from going over the emotional threshold into a hyper-aroused state. If that is the case, use the Regulating Skill to redirect your child to a quieter activity.

### **What about death play?**

Children have been playing dead or making a character die since the beginning of time, but parents worry about this kind of play and how to handle it. This type of play is very normal, and is sometimes observed as a doing/undoing type of play where a character dies and then comes alive (Benedict, 2002). It is normal for children to be curious about death, and this type of play may symbolize endings for children.

Parents can use the Describing Skill when they notice this type of play. For example, when your child falls to the ground and plays dead, you could say something like, “Now you’re down. You’re very quiet. You’re not moving.” And



if your child jumps up and says, “I’m alive!” you could use the Paraphrasing Skill and say something like, “Oh, now your alive again.” Or, if your child plays out a scene where a dragon dies and says, “Now the dragon is dead!” then you could use the Paraphrasing Skill and say something like, “The dragon is dead; he’s not going to bother anybody now.”

## What would unhealthy play themes look like?

Play therapists watch for certain red flags in a child’s play that may indicate emotional difficulties. Gil (2017) has identified certain characteristics of “toxic” play, such as:

- A play scenario is compulsively repeated with a rigid story that changes very little over time. The story starts and ends the same way. There is rigid repetition of the same sequence of play. No new characters are added and no new endings to the story emerge.
- Playing does not reduce the child’s anxiety. Tension in the child’s breathing and movements is noticed and there is no evidence of a release of tension during play. The child is “driven” to play and the play is devoid of pleasure.

If over time you are noticing the above characteristics of your child’s play, and that the play themes are continually disturbing and end in a negative manner with no resolution, you may want to seek professional help from a child therapist, play therapist, family physician, pediatrician, child psychologist, or child psychiatrist.

Also, if you find you are struggling with feelings that come up from the way your child plays, this may be an indication you may want to speak to a professional about these feelings. Feelings like this may be arising from a parent’s own real-life experiences.

## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we got a better understanding of children’s play. We took a detailed look at play themes, which are patterns of play that are repeated over time when children are given opportunities to play freely, as in child-directed play. Most common play themes for children are found within the following groups, which were defined by Benedict (2002):

- Power and aggressive themes
- Control and safety themes
- Nurturance and family themes
- Mastery themes

Play themes are often related to real-life situations that a child has experienced, and children use play to express themselves. Observing play allows parents to better understand their children. However, we need to look at play themes with some caution, as we cannot interpret exactly the meaning of a play theme for a child because a play theme can have many different meanings. Parents need to remember to keep an open mind about the meanings of their children's play.

We also examined some reasons why play themes emerge. Repeated play scenarios and themes can mean that your child is learning to understand and cope with a problem, feeling, or situation in real life. We also had a look at fantastical and aggressive play, since both of these types of children's play are very common.

# Chapter 12:

## Switching Play Styles

### What Style of Play Should You Use?

Now that you have a better understanding of children's play, let's return to the question, "When should I 'jump in' to a Directive Role to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime where I can add something or direct something in the play, and when should I 'back off' to a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime and let my child lead the direction of the play?" To answer this question, it can be very helpful to ask yourself the following:

- "What is my goal?"
- "What does my child need?"

### What is your goal?

Do you want to give your child a chance to use their imagination and creative skills without a lot of direction from you? Do you have a specific developmental or learning objective that you want to assist your child with through a play activity, such as learning to listen and follow directions, master fine motor skills, or remain emotionally regulated? Do you want to let your child know that you accept their choices and decisions? Do you want to stimulate your child to engage in play? Do you want to communicate new perspectives and possibilities to your child? Do you want to encourage autonomy and independence in your child? Depending on your goal for that particular play session, the type of play you choose will be different.

## What does your child need?

How does your child play? Does your child need more structure or less structure to the playtime? Does your child need more interaction or less interaction from you? Does your child need you to be more energetic and enthusiastic or less energetic and enthusiastic? Does your child need different toys or play materials? Does your child need opportunities to become more independent and less reliant on you? Does your child need support in mastering a task or understanding something?

## Match your goals to your child's needs

Basically, your goals should be tied in closely to what your child needs. Determining what are your child's needs at this specific time and in this particular situation are where your parental judgement and intuition come into play.

I believe it is helpful for parents to know the objectives for and differences between Child-Directed Playtime, where parents are in a Nondirective Role, and Parent-Directed Playtime, where parents are in a Directive Role.

.....  
*Please see the section “Differences between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime” in Chapter 2 for a detailed look at what is involved with each of these styles of play in order to get a better idea of which style of parent-child play to use.*  
.....

If the following are some of your primary goals for playtime based on your child's needs, you may want to put yourself into a **Nondirective Role** to facilitate **Child-Directed Playtime**:

- To allow your child opportunities to express a wide range of feelings and to communicate ideas, perceptions, conflicts, needs, and desires
- To give your child opportunities to make decisions and choices
- To allow your child opportunities to experience a sense of power and control

- To support your child by providing an environment of acceptance

If the following are some of your primary goals for playtime based on your child's needs, you may want to put yourself into a **Directive Role** to facilitate

### **Parent-Directed Playtime:**

- To support your child by structuring the playtime
- To challenge, guide, and support the development of your child's physical, intellectual, emotional, and social skills through play
- To stimulate your child's interest and engagement in interactive play
- To prevent your child from becoming overstimulated or out of control in playtime

### **Are you being directive or nondirective?**

Here are some examples showing the differences in how a parent in a Nondirective or Directive Role would respond to their child:

- Child: "I want to play!"
- Nondirective Parent: "You want to play now!" You are using the Feelings Identification Skill to notice and acknowledge your child's excitement and desire to play.
- Directive Parent: "Let's play with your cars!" You are using the Engagement Skill to make a suggestion in order to engage with your child in play.
- Child: "What's this?"
- Nondirective Parent: "You're not sure what that is." You are using the Feelings Identification Skill to acknowledge your child's curiosity and interest, and the Independence Skill to allow your child time to think.
- Directive Parent: "That's for using with this train here." You are using the Engagement Skill to support your child's learning by guiding and providing needed information.
- Child: "What should we do?"
- Nondirective Parent: "You can choose what we do." You are using the Independence Skill to encourage your child to make choices.

- Directive Parent: “Let’s play Crazy Eights.” You are using the Engagement Skill by suggesting an activity you and your child can engage in together.
- Child: “How does this work?”
- Nondirective Parent: “Hmm, you’re trying to figure out how that works.” You are using the Describing Skill to acknowledge and accept your child’s questioning, and the Independence Skill to allow your child to problem solve.
- Directive Parent: “Here, I’ll show you.” You are using the Engagement Skill to provide information and assistance to help your child master something.
- Child: “Brownie (a stuffed dog) is scared of the dragon!”
- Nondirective Parent: “Yikes! That dragon is scaring Brownie!” You are using the Paraphrasing Skill and the Feelings Identification Skill to identify a feeling coming up in the play.
- Directive Parent: “What can Brownie do now?” You are using the Engagement Skill to ask your child a question as a way to promote thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Child: Throws the baby doll to the floor.
- Nondirective Parent: “Now the baby is on the floor.” You are using the Describing Skill to notice, objectively describe, and accept your child’s actions since no one is getting hurt and nothing is getting broken in the play.
- Directive Parent: “How do you think the baby feels now?” You are using the Engagement Skill to ask your child a question as a way to support your child’s learning.
- Child: Has two pirate figures fighting each other.
- Nondirective Parent: “Those two pirates are fighting hard against each other.” You are using the Describing Skill to notice, objectively describe, and accept the play aggression (since things remain safe and non-destructive) in order to support your child in learning about aggressive feelings.
- Directive Parent: “Let’s make a hiding spot for one of the pirates.” You are using the Regulating Skill and re-directing your child to a quieter and more regulated activity.

- Child: Getting angry at a Lego structure she is working on.
- Nondirective Parent: “Looks like you’re feeling frustrated with the Lego.” You are using the Feelings Identification Skill to identify and accept a feeling coming up in your child and helping her learn about and manage this feeling.
- Directive Parent: “Let me show you an easy way to do that.” You are using the Engagement Skill to provide guidance to your child to reduce frustration and support mastery of a skill.
- Child: “Look what I drew!”
- Nondirective Parent: “I can see you drew a purple house. You’re very happy with how it turned out.” You are using the Describing Skill to objectively describe what your child did, and the Encouragement Skill to acknowledge his happiness with his drawing so he can internalize his success.
- Directive Parent: “Good job! You coloured in all the white spaces.” You are using the Engagement Skill to praise and reinforce your child for mastering a task that required some skill.
- Child: “Put the blue car in the garage.”
- Nondirective Parent: “You want me to put the blue car right here in the garage.” You are using the Following Directions Skill to follow your child’s directions and allow your child to control how the play unfolds.
- Directive Parent: “Let’s put this blue car through the car wash first, then put it into the garage after it is clean.” You are using the Engagement Skill to change and elaborate on something in your child’s play story in order to guide and support your child.

## When do you switch styles?

Children’s play can be very complex and your goals and your child’s needs may change throughout a particular playtime. Being able to switch between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime is a very useful skill for parents. As I have said earlier, neither style of play is “better” than the other. At certain times, Child-Directed Playtime is useful in order to allow your child to experience a sense of control and independence in the playtime.

At other times, Parent-Directed Playtime is useful to support and guide your child more directly in playtime.



*Something to consider:*

*Switching between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime requires a solid knowledge of each of these two styles of parent-child play. I highly recommend that you become familiar with each style of parent-child play separately before trying to switch styles in the middle of a playtime!*



## **Advanced Playtime Skill: The Switch-or-Stay Skill**

### **How Do You Use This Skill?**

Being able to switch between Child-Directed and Parent-Directed Playtime is an advanced skill. It will allow you to be more effective in achieving your goals and meeting your child's needs. So, in advanced parent-child playtime, in order to meet your child's needs:

- If you are in a Nondirective Role facilitating Child-Directed Playtime, you can choose to:
  - Stay or remain in a Nondirective Role and continue to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime, or
  - Switch to a Directive Role to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime
- If you are in a Directive Role facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime, you can choose to:
  - Stay or remain in a Directive Role and continue to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime, or
  - Switch to a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime

To know whether to **stay** in a particular style of play, or **switch** to a different style of play, it helps to observe and monitor your child's play behaviors and responses throughout the playtime.



## Monitoring how your child engages in play

During playtime, it is important to observe and monitor how your child responds to your directions, suggestions, corrections, ideas, praise, or questions when you are in a Directive Role and facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime, and how your child responds to the lack of parental direction and structure when you are in a Nondirective Role and facilitating Child-Directed Playtime. Parents need to be sensitive to their children's responses. Being sensitive to your child during playtime is an important part of connecting with your child. Playtime is all about supporting your child in feeling good about interacting with you.

Your child may be engaging well in the playtime and may be maintaining interest in the play activity for a reasonable period of time. If your child is engaging well in the playtime, you may want to continue doing what you are doing and stay or remain in whatever style of parent-child play that you started with.

However, at times, children may have difficulties engaging in playtime. For example, your child may become resistant or disengaged, overstimulated or out of control, overly controlling and directive, or hesitant and undecided.

When you notice your child is having difficulties engaging in the playtime, you may want to switch from one style to another. Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules when deciding whether to remain in a role facilitating a particular style of play or to switch to a different role to facilitate a different style of play. It may involve some trial and error on your part and consideration of your child's temperament and physical or emotional state at the time. This is why it is so important to monitor how your child is engaging with you in the playtime.

I think one of the best ways to understand this complex concept is to look at some examples of playtime scenarios. The following examples come from a composite of play scenarios I engaged in with children during my time as a play therapist. Please note, I am offering only some very basic guidelines for when parents could “jump in” to a Directive Role or “back off” to a Nondirective Role in playtime.

## Examples of Using the Advanced Playtime Switch-or-Stay Skill

Let's look at the examples of different ways your child may be engaging in the playtime. Your child may be:

- Engaging well in the playtime
- Oppositional, resistant, or disengaged from the play
- Overstimulated and out of control
- Controlling and directive
- Hesitant and undecided

### Your child may be engaging well in the playtime

These are some indications that your child is engaging well in playtime:

- With Child-Directed Playtime, your child has initiated a play activity or scenario; he has chosen toys and is focused on directing how the play or story unfolds.
- With Parent-Directed Playtime, your child is attentive to your directions and is willingly and cooperatively engaging in the structured play activity or has incorporated some of your ideas or suggestions into the play.
- Your child is interested in and focused on the play activity for a reasonable period of time so that the play is not fragmented and unfocused.
- Your child may be expressing a variety of feelings and themes through the play activities, including uncomfortable feelings and themes (this is good!), but is not getting overly anxious or frustrated and is not exhibiting out-of-control behaviors.
- Your child may be telling you things about the play (or even things not related to the play) or may not be saying anything while remaining focused, interested, and engaged in the play.
- Your child may or may not be asking you to join her in the play or giving you directions on what to do in the playtime.

- Your child may be using their imagination and creative skills and may be coming up with new ideas or ways of doing things.
- Your child may be problem-solving and mastering tasks with little, or no, help from you.
- Even if the theme of the play is similar to previous playtimes, you notice your child making subtle (or not so subtle) changes, such as using different toys or materials, making things simpler or more complex, adding or removing characters in the play, or changing the plot or ending of a story.

### **Example #1: The animal family story**

Playtime Description: Starting and staying in Child-Directed Playtime

**You have started in Child-Directed Playtime by using the Nondirective Role Skills.** You use the Independence Skill and let your child determine the play activity and take control of how the activity unfolds. You are refraining from directing the play and asking questions to your child. You are also using the Empathic Skills by describing what is going on, paraphrasing what your child is saying, and identifying any feelings coming up in the play. Instead of praising, you are using encouraging statements that focus on your child's efforts and strengths.

**Your child is engaging well in imaginary play.** She is focused on and interested in what she is doing. She has chosen toys and has set up a play scenario with a storyline that she is creating. There is a family with a dad represented by a lion, a zebra as a mom, and two baby tigers are chosen as the children. There is also another family with two large giraffes representing parents and two smaller giraffes as the children. Your child has set up a house for each family using blocks that outline rooms in each house and has also added blocks representing furniture.

Your child develops a story while you use the Independence and Empathic Skills. For example, as your child decides that the giraffe and tiger children are having a sleep-over, you use the Describing Skill and say, "So now the mom zebra lets the giraffe children stay the night for a sleep-over." And when your child makes the giraffe and tiger children act very happy and excited, you use the Feelings Identification Skill to say, "It looks like the kids are very happy and excited to have a sleep-over."

You continue using the Empathic Skills and sometimes your child responds and elaborates, and sometimes she does not respond to your statements or paraphrases. Your child develops a story that continues with the characters having dinner, going to bed, waking up in the morning, and the giraffe children returning to their giraffe parents the next day.

**You have remained in a Nondirective Role, facilitating Child-Directed Playtime for the entire playtime** because your child has engaged well in play by remaining interested and focused on this play scenario for the past thirty minutes. Although she has not directed you to do anything and you did not need to use the Following Directions Skill, you used the Independence and Empathic Skills throughout the entire playtime. As a result, you have allowed your child to use her imagination to develop a storyline, elaborate on the themes in the story, and come up with a satisfactory ending to the story. You provided your child with an opportunity to express herself and learn through imaginary play.



*I wanted to let you know this:*

*Even though Parent-Directed Playtime is excellent for engaging children in play activities, regulating their emotional intensity, and supporting them in mastering skills, I believe that the many special benefits of Child-Directed Playtime are often underestimated and that parents may tend to put themselves in a Directive Role when being in a Nondirective Role would be more beneficial for their children. Parents may assume that being in a Nondirective Role means being passive or uninvolved. This is very far from the truth! Child-Directed Playtime is very powerful and has many benefits, not only for strengthening the parent-child relationship, but also facilitating your child's self-expression and helping your child with independence and self-responsibility.*



**Example #2: Balloon fun playtime**

Playtime Description: Starting and staying in Parent-Directed Playtime

**You decide to begin with Parent-Directed Playtime by putting yourself into a Directive Role** and using the Engagement Skill. You choose a

play activity that you think will spark your child's interests. You decide on a balloon volleyball game.

You get your child's attention and clearly give directions on how you will play the game by saying enthusiastically, "Let's play a fun game together with this balloon and see how long we can keep it from touching the ground. First you hit it in the air, then I take a turn to hit it in the air before it touches the ground. We count how many times we can hit it in the air before it touches the ground. When the balloon touches the ground, we have to start at number one again. Let's see how high we can get." You start the game playfully, expressing excitement and exaggerating the difficulty you are having in a comical manner. You encourage your child's participation and praise his efforts.

**You notice your child responds happily and participates willingly and cooperatively in this game.** Your child continues to stay interested and engaged in the activity. He is following the rules and is expressing a wide variety of feelings, yet not getting over-excited or out of control.

You decide to remain in a Directive Role and continue to use the Engagement Skill. To keep your child engaged, you change the game a bit and increase the challenge level of the game by giving new instructions to your child by stating, for example, that you can only use one part of your body to hit the balloon, such as your elbow, your knee, or your head. You play the new version of the game using different body parts and your child continues to engage well in the play, expressing interest, focus, and pleasure.

**You remained in a Directive Role, facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime for the entire playtime.** You have used the Engagement Skill to spark your child's interest and your child has engaged willingly and happily with the play activity while remaining regulated and in control. You have provided your child with a positive relational experience with you.

## Your child may be resistant in playtime

These are some indications that your child is becoming resistant in playtime:

- Your child may become oppositional to you, not accepting anything you say or do
- Your child may complain about things

- Your child may become defiant by not listening to you or following your directions
- Your child may be turning away from you or ignoring you

This can be really discouraging. You are trying to connect with your child in a fun way and it just doesn't seem to be working! Here are some example scenarios of this occurring and how you might respond.

### **Example #3: Too structured!**

Playtime Description: Starting in Parent-Directed Playtime and switching to Child-Directed Playtime

**You have started in a Directive Role, facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime** using the Engagement Skill by choosing the board game Snakes and Ladders to play with your child. Your goal is to help your child learn how to play this game. You set things up and remind your child about the rules and how to play the game.

**You begin the game, but after a few turns you notice your child is becoming resistant.** She appears bored and uninterested. She is starting to complain she never gets the right number when throwing the dice, and indicates she wants an extra turn.

**You decide to accept your child's resistance, and switch from a Directive Role to a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime** because you get the sense that your child needs less structure in the playtime and has some creative ideas about doing things differently. Also, you want to keep playtime fun and to avoid a power struggle between you and your child!

You forget about the "real" rules and play the game the way your child wants. You let her know that you don't have to play by the real rules today, and say something like, "I have an idea; let's make up some new rules for the game today." You start using the Independence Skill and allow your child to come up with some different rules. You use the Following Directions Skill to follow your child's directions on how the game unfolds, remaining neutral and objective. You are also using the Empathic Skills to describe what is going on, paraphrase what your child is saying, encourage your child, and identify any feelings that come up.

**You notice your child is starting to participate happily in this activity.** She starts to come up with some creative ideas and rules for the game that she

explains to you. She remains focused and interested on developing this new game and interacting with you.

**You decide to remain in a Nondirective Role for the rest of the playtime.** By switching to Child-Directed Playtime you are giving your child an opportunity to use her imagination and creative skills. You are also providing her with an environment of acceptance. That is, you are letting her know that you will accept her ideas and choices on doing things, even if they are not the way you would do things. You decide to teach your child the real rules of the game another time when she is more receptive.

#### **Example #4: Too boring!**

Playtime Description: Starting and staying in Parent-Directed Playtime

**You have started in a Directive Role, facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime with your child.** Using the Engagement Skill, you suggest building something together with Lego and you start putting some Lego blocks together.

**You notice your child is ignoring you.** Although your child is quietly putting some blocks together, they continue to face away from you and ignore what you are saying and doing.

**You decide to remain in a Directive Role and re-engage your child in play** by using the Engagement Skill. You think of a different activity that would spark your child's interest. You remember that your child has been very interested in racing cars recently, so you decide to play a cotton ball race game. You say something like, "Let's pretend these cotton balls are racing cars and we can race them across the room by blowing with straws."

Your child listens to what you are suggesting, and quietly starts to engage in the game. Without saying anything, your child lines up the cotton balls at the start line and indicates for you to take up your straw and start. Your child then starts to blow their cotton ball ahead of yours.

**You observe your child's responses and notice that your child has started to engage in this activity. You remain in a Directive Role** using the Engagement Skill to keep your child engaged. To spark interest, you add variations to the game, such as a rule that you have to blow the cotton balls around a corner, you each start with two cotton balls, you can use two straws to blow, or you have to keep your eyes closed when blowing. You also use the Empathic Skills to connect with your child. You play the game so that you

are competitive enough so your child remains engaged in the game, but not so competitive as to make it too challenging for your child. You and your child play this game for as long as they stay engaged.

## Your child may become overstimulated in playtime

Sometimes children become over-aroused emotionally and out of control during playtime. These are some indications that your child is becoming overstimulated:

- Your child's behaviors are becoming increasingly wild, chaotic, or out of control
- Your child may not be able to focus on any play activity or toy
- Your child may be expressing increasing irritation, frustration, anger, or anxiety
- Your child may be starting to engage in unsafe or destructive behaviors

This can be very challenging for parents. Most parents start to feel themselves becoming emotionally dysregulated when their children start to reach the arousal threshold.

### Example #5: Out-of-control pirate

Playtime Description: Starting in Child-Directed Playtime and switching to Parent-Directed Playtime

**You have started playtime in a Nondirective Role with Child-Directed Playtime** and your child has chosen to dress up as a “good” pirate and wants you to be the “bad” pirate. Your child is hiding behind the couch and wants you to search for her and catch her. Using the Following Directions Skill, you are playing out your role as the bad pirate. You find where your child is hiding and try to catch her, but she avoids you and hides somewhere else. This is repeated several times. You are noticing your child is getting excited, but still remains under control, so you continue to play this game.

**Your child starts to get even more excited as you continue playing this game.** Her actions are getting wilder and more out of control. This is making you feel anxious. Your child is having fun, but you don't want her to get out of control.



**You decide to switch to a Directive Role to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime** because you feel your child needs more structure to regulate her nervous system. You use the Regulating Skill to redirect your child to a quieter activity that will help her to regulate. You take a few deep breaths to regulate yourself and then get her attention and say something like, “I have an idea for a fun game! Let’s make a pirate cave for you to hide in so I can’t find you. Where should the cave be? What can we use to make the cave? How big should the cave be? Should it have one or two openings?” You slow your movements and speech and focus on setting up the cave. You use the Empathic Skills to attune to your child. You ignore your child’s directions to chase you now.

Your child ideally will be able to regulate her nervous system and focus on engaging with you to build the pirate cave. By doing this, you have supported your child in learning to self-regulate. You and your child would engage in this activity for as long as she stays regulated.

#### **Example #6: The dinosaur referee**

Playtime Description: Starting in Child-Directed Playtime, switching to Parent-Directed Playtime, and switching back to Child-Directed Playtime

**You have started playtime in a Nondirective Role with Child-Directed Playtime**, and your child has chosen to play with small dinosaurs. You are using the Independence Skill to let your child direct how the story unfolds. Your child has set two teams of dinosaurs up on the floor and has told you they are going to have a contest and fight each other. Your child holds one dinosaur in each hand and begins to have them fight each other. One wins and the other loses. This is repeated several times. You are using the Empathic Skills by describing what is happening and identifying any feelings coming up by saying things like, “Wow! That dinosaur looks really angry!”; “The little dinosaur is biting the bigger dinosaur”; “Now two more are coming to fight”; and “That one looks scared.”

**You notice your child is getting wilder and more agitated with the dinosaur play.** You know, however, from past experience that your child gets easily over-excited and out of control, and when that happens, your child will “lose it” and start throwing their toys wildly. You’re starting to feel uncomfortable!

**You decide to switch from a Nondirective Role to a Directive Role to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime.** You use the Regulating Skill to take some deep breaths to regulate your own nervous system and slow your speech and movements down. You use the Engagement Skill to structure the imaginary play in order to support your child in learning to remain regulated. To do this, you take on the role of a referee dinosaur in order to reduce the intensity of the fighting between your child's dinosaurs. You take a dinosaur that is not being used and give your dinosaur a voice by saying something like, "I'm the referee. Each fight will last only five seconds, then the fighting stops and the winner is declared!" You continue to monitor your child's emotional arousal level.

**Your child has accepted your added structure to the play scenario** and is now having their dinosaurs respect your referee dinosaur's rule. Your child is staying emotionally regulated, and at the same time expressing a wide variety of feelings through the play characters. Even though the content of the play is wild and aggressive, your child does not throw any of the toys.

**Since your child remains emotionally regulated, you switch back to a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime again.** Your child may still be expressing aggressive themes in the play, such as fighting dinosaurs, and that is okay as long as your child does not get emotionally or behaviorally out of control. You are allowing your child to express aggressive feelings safely and to learn how to manage them.

## **Your child may be overly controlling in playtime**

Sometimes children are very "bossy" or directive in playtime, which can be very irritating and frustrating for parents. For example:

- Your child may be constantly telling you what to do
- Your child may be disapproving of how you are doing things
- Your child wants you to do things their way

### **Example #7: Hard-to-please knights**

Playtime Description: Starting in Parent-Directed Playtime and switching to Child-Directed Playtime

**You have started in a Directive Role, facilitating Parent-Directed Playtime** by using the Engagement Skill. You are taking out the blocks and

suggesting that you and your child build a castle for the king and queen and that the knights will be guarding it. You are helping your child with setting up the fort with blocks, setting up the knights around the fort, and putting the king and queen in the fort.

**You notice your child is very controlling in the playtime.** He is giving you many directions and wants you to set things up his way. He rejects any help you offer. He is constantly telling you what he wants you to do. Every time you add something interesting to the fort, he tells you to do it a different way! You're beginning to feel irritated and frustrated.

**You decide to accept your child's need for control and switch from a Directive Role to a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime.** You use the Independence Skill and let your child set things up and direct the play scenario the way he wants. You use the Following Directions Skill to follow your child's directions for setting up the fort and the characters. If you are not sure what to do, you ask your child for directions and clarification, by asking, for example, "Where does this knight go?"

You allow your child to set up the fort in his own way, even if it is not the way you would set it up. For example, he may be building an unstable tower that will likely fall down, but you allow the natural consequences that the tower may possibly fall down, and if it does you say, "Oh, you're mad that the tower you were building fell over, but it looks like you're going to build it up again."

You refrain from telling your child what to do or not do. You also use the Empathic Skills to describe objectively what you see happening, paraphrase what your child is telling you, and identify any feelings that are coming up in the play. As long as things are safe and not destructive, you allow the play to unfold the way your child directs.

**You notice your child is starting to engage well in Child-Directed Playtime.** He is focused on the play and is expressing a wide range of feelings, but not getting overstimulated or out of control. He is developing an imaginary story with an interesting plot.

**You decide to remain in a Nondirective Role for the rest of the playtime.** You are providing your child with an opportunity to feel in control and in charge of things. This may be very beneficial if things in your child's life have been difficult and you get the sense he is feeling powerless.

## Your child may be undecided in playtime

Sometimes children seem to be hesitant or undecided in playtime. Here are some indications that your child may be feeling unsure:

- Your child may be very undecided about choosing what to play with
- Your child may seem hesitant to engage in play or may even be doing nothing at all

Again, this can be frustrating for parents. It's hard to see your child so undecided and unable to choose what to do.

### **Example #8: Let's have a birthday party!**

Playtime Description: Starting in Child-Directed Playtime, switching to Parent-Directed Playtime, then switching back to Child-Directed Playtime

**You have started in a Nondirective Role with Child-Directed Playtime, inviting your child to choose what to play with, but your child seems hesitant to choose something to play with.** He is looking around at things, cannot decide on what to do, and is unable to initiate play himself.

You think your child may just need a bit of prompting from you initially to engage in imaginary play. **You decide to facilitate imaginary play for your child by switching to a Directive Role and Parent-Directed Playtime.** Using the Engagement Skill, you would say something like, "How about we pretend that Scruffy (a stuffed dog) is having a birthday party today? We could bake a (pretend) birthday cake. Let's use these (toy) bowls and pans. And this box can be the oven." You would then start to set up the toys, setting up the "oven" and getting out some bowls and pans.

**You continue to monitor how your child engages in the playtime and you notice he has accepted your suggestions and ideas** and is now interested in and focused on getting things ready for the birthday party. He is getting out some bowls and plates and setting them on a blanket laid out on the floor.

Because your child has engaged in this play scenario, to extend the story you continue in a Directive Role using the Engagement Skill by saying something like, "Let's invite all of his friends and get them to bring presents for him. Maybe we could make it a surprise party! Who is Scruffy going to

invite?” Your child responds positively, accepts your suggestion, and starts to gather up some other stuffed animals to come to the party.

If your child needs a bit more encouragement, you could continue in a Directive Role using the Engagement Skill and say something like, “Hmm, I think Scruffy wants to invite Brownie (another stuffed dog).” You could then take hold of Brownie and role-play this character by saying something like, “Hooray, I love birthday parties. I hope we get cake! Hmm, what shall I choose for Scruffy? Maybe this little car.” Again, you monitor your child’s reaction to your addition to the story.

**You notice your child is engaging well in the play scenario and is coming up with his own ideas on the story.** He is focused on the characters and the plot of the story and may be changing or adding things to how the story unfolds. He may even start to role-play another stuffed animal character to interact with your Brownie character.

**This is an ideal point to switch to a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime** and let your child use his imagination and creative skills to take over how the rest of the story unfolds. Now you will use the Independence Skill and will not add anything to your child’s storyline. You will continue to use the Empathic Skills to describe your child’s actions, identify any feelings coming up, paraphrase what your child is telling you, and encourage rather than praise your child. Your child may give you specific directions as to what to do, so you use the Following Directions Skill to do things the way he wants, as long as things stay safe and non-destructive.



*This is important for you to remember:*

*If your child is engaging in unsafe or destructive behavior, you would always put yourself into a Directive Role and use the Limit-Setting Skill to limit the unsafe or destructive behavior(s), no matter if you are engaged in Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime.*



## Chapter Summary

In this chapter, we looked at switching between Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, in other words, when should you “jump in” to a

Directive Role to facilitate Parent-Directed Playtime, and when should you “back off” into a Nondirective Role to facilitate Child-Directed Playtime. This is where parents need to have a good understanding of what their children need in terms of parent-child interaction. Parents will then match their own goals for a particular playtime to their child’s needs.

Switching between the two styles of parent-child play is an advanced skill. To do this, parents are introduced to the Advanced Playtime Switch-or-Stay Skill. With this skill, parents have the option of staying in one particular style of play if the playtime seems to be going well and their children are engaging well in the playtime, or switching the style of play if difficulties for their children arise in the play, for example if there is resistance, escalating emotional arousal, controlling behaviors, or hesitancy. Parents are encouraged to monitor how their children are engaging in play during the playtime.

# Chapter 13:

## Generalizing Playtime Skills to Real Life

You may be wondering if you can use the various playtime “skills” outside of a playtime setting and in real life situations, or if these skills have any benefits outside of a playtime setting. These are great questions, so let’s consider this idea.

In the previous chapters, I have identified the following nine parent skills to be used during either Child-Directed Playtime or Parent-Directed Playtime:

1. The Describing Skill
2. The Feelings Identification Skill
3. The Paraphrasing Skill
4. The Encouragement Skill
5. The Independence Skill
6. The Following Directions Skill
7. The Engagement Skill
8. The Regulating Skill
9. The Limit-Setting Skill

Back in Chapter 1, when I introduced Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime, I discussed the importance of these skills for helping with children's healthy development and also strengthening the parent-child relationship. These skills are based on attachment theory, which encourages parents to be sensitive and responsive to their children. These skills are also based on principles of healthy human interactions, such as respect, empathy, and boundary setting. The benefits of using these skills are extensive and outlined in Chapter 1. Each of the above nine playtime skills has a positive impact on children's development. Let's look at how you can incorporate these skills into real life situations in order to extend the benefits of these skills.

## Describing Skill

Throughout the day, watch your child and describe your child's behaviors out loud using an objective and non-judgemental Describing Statement (Note: Do not do this if your child is doing something unsafe or destructive!). By using this skill on a regular basis, you are providing your child with positive attention and letting your child know you are interested in what they are doing. Here are some examples of what you could say:

- You notice your child reading a book; you could say something like, "Oh, I see you've decided to read your Paw Patrol book today."
- You notice your child jumping; you could say something like, "That jump was higher than the last one you did."
- You notice your child giving a toy to a sibling; you could say something like, "Looks like you're sharing the cars with your sister."
- Your child is helping you fold the laundry and is sorting the laundry into colour piles; you could say something like, "I'm noticing you're putting all the dark towels in one pile today."

## Feelings Identification Skill

Throughout the day, identify any feelings, preferences, or desires that you notice in your child using a neutral, non-judgemental Feelings Identification Statement. By using this skill in real-life situations, you are helping your child develop an emotional vocabulary. You could say things like:



- “You’re really excited you got invited to the birthday party.”
- “I can see you’re feeling sad losing that pencil.”
- “Looks like you’re feeling bored right now.”
- “I’m noticing you’re feeling a bit confused; you’re not sure what to do.”
- “You’re mad that your sister has the blue ball.”
- “You’re feeling very curious about how that works.”
- “You really want to stay at the playground.”
- “You really don’t like it when the vacuum makes a loud noise.”
- “You wish you could have that cookie right now.”

Remember, you are NOT asking your child a question about what they are feeling, but rather you are using your parental empathic abilities and then making a statement to identify the feeling that you are noticing. Say “Looks like you are feeling sad,” or “I’m noticing you are feeling sad.” DO NOT ask “Are you feeling sad?” or “How are you feeling?” when using this skill.

## Paraphrasing Skill

Whenever your child tells you something, verbally reflect, or paraphrase, what your child has told you. By using this skill, you are showing acceptance and understanding, which will encourage verbal reciprocity and open communication. Here are examples of using the Paraphrasing Skill in daily life:

- Your child runs up and says, “I hate Johnny! He’s mean and takes my ball away!” You could say, “Sounds like you’re mad at Johnny because he steals your ball.”
- Your child points and says, “I see a blue bird over there.” You could say, “Oh, you found a bird with blue feathers.”
- Your child says, “Today I am going to wear my orange shirt.” You could say, “You’ve chosen your orange shirt to wear today.”
- Your child says, “This is dumb!” You could say, “You’re not happy with that.”

## Encouragement Skill

Parents can provide encouragement to their children by focusing on their efforts, feelings, and strengths rather than using evaluative praise. Evaluative praise (for example, “Wow, what a great job!” “I love what you did!” “Good job!” “Well done.” “You did a fantastic job of colouring in that picture.” “It’s beautiful!” “You’re amazing at painting!” “Wow, you are so fast at putting that puzzle together!”) is appropriate for many situations; however, it focuses on the successful mastery or achievement of something. By using the Encouragement Skill instead of evaluative praise, you are empowering your child and helping them to internalize their positive qualities. Here are some examples of encouraging statements you can say to your child in everyday situations:

- “It looks like you know how to make it work!” (Acknowledging a strength)
- “I can see you’re working really hard on that.” (Acknowledging an effort)
- “You are very happy with the way that picture turned out!” (Acknowledging a feeling)
- “You figured it out!” (Acknowledging a strength)
- “I can see you are concentrating very hard on doing that.” (Acknowledging an effort)
- “It looks like you are really feeling curious about how that works.” (Acknowledging a feeling)

## Independence Skill

Whenever it is safe and appropriate, parents can allow their children to make their own choices and decisions and can refrain from making any judgements or directing their children in any way (unless parents need to limit unsafe or destructive behaviors). By using the Independence Skill, you are showing respect and acceptance of your child’s choices, allowing your child to freely explore the world and to develop a positive sense of self. Here are some examples of using the Independence Skill outside of playtime:

### **Example #1: Princess goes to school**

- Your child is getting dressed and has put on a dress-up princess dress before going to preschool. If the preschool allows the children to wear certain dress-up items of clothing from home to preschool, and if you want to use the Independence Skill to allow your child to make this choice, you would NOT say, “You can’t wear that dress to school. Go and change into your shirt and shorts.” Instead, you could say something like, “Looks like you’ve decided to wear that dress to school today.”

### **Example #2: Gardening fun**

- You and your child are digging in the garden and your child takes a hand fork gardening tool and says, “This looks like a rake; I’m going to rake the grass.” Using the Independence Skill, you refrain from telling your child what the tool is actually used for, and you would NOT correct your child by saying, “That’s not a rake; it is a hand fork for loosening dirt in the garden. Here, let me show you.” Instead, you would accept your child’s choice of how to use the tool and say, “You’ve decided to rake the grass with that tool.”

### **Example #3: Paper bag disaster**

- You notice your child filling up a paper bag with many snack items to take to the park. It looks like the bag is going to tear, but you decide to use the Independence Skill and let your child continue by saying something like, “You’re filling up that bag with lots of snacks.” You would refrain from telling your child to limit the snacks that go into the bag and allow the natural consequence of the bag breaking to happen. Your child then may say, “Oh-oh, I have to use a bigger bag.” You could say something like, “You’re going to look for a bigger bag now.”

## **Following Directions Skill**

If your child asks you to do something specific, you CAN choose to do what your child is asking you to do by using the Following Directions Skill. Your

child may correct you, and that is okay—just do what you are being asked to do. If you are unsure of what to do, you may ask your child for more clarification.

By using this skill, you are allowing your child to experience a sense of control. Of course, if your child is asking you to do something unsafe or destructive, you would not do what they have asked you to do, but rather you would re-direct your child to an appropriate behavior. Here are examples of what the Following Directions Skill would look like outside of playtime:

**Example #1: A different way to button**

- Your child asks you to button his sweater in the wrong holes; you could say, “You want the buttons to go in different holes today” and you would proceed to button the sweater the way your child wants.

**Example #2: “I want the blue bowl!”**

- Your child asks you to put her cereal in a blue bowl; you could say, “Today you want the blue bowl.” You would proceed to put the cereal into the blue bowl.

**Example #3: Basket of stones**

- You and your child are outside and she asks you to fill up a basket with little stones; you could say, “Okay, here I go putting these little stones into this basket” as you start filling the basket with stones. Your child says, “No! Don’t put the white ones in!” You would remove the white stones and say something like, “You don’t want any white stones in the basket,” continuing to add only the dark stones to the basket.

## **Limit-Setting Skill**

In everyday life, when you notice your child is engaging in, or is about to engage in, unsafe or destructive behaviors, you can use the Limit-Setting Skill protocol as set out in Chapter 5 to set limits and then warn of and enforce consequences to stop these behaviors. When you use this skill in both playtime and in everyday life, you are helping your child learn to take responsibility for their behavior. Here’s a couple of examples of using the Limit-Setting Skill protocol outside of playtime:

### **Example #1: No throwing hard balls in the house!**

- Your child throws a hard ball in the house. You would set the limit by saying, “No throwing that hard ball in the house.” If your child continues to throw the hard ball, you could repeat the limit by saying, “You’re not allowed to throw that hard ball, but you can throw this soft foam ball instead,” and “You’re very excited, but you need to stop throwing that hard ball inside because it is dangerous.”
- If your child continues to throw the hard ball after you have repeated the limit, you would warn of a possible consequence by saying, “If you throw that hard ball again, I will put it away for today.”
- If your child throws the hard ball one more time after you give the warning of a consequence, you would then enforce the consequence and say, “Looks like you chose to throw the hard ball again, so I need to put it away for today.” Then you proceed to put the ball away for the day.

### **Example #2: Water spray fun?**

- You and your child are outside and you have given your child permission to water the garden with the hose. After a few minutes, your child starts to spray over the neighbor’s fence so you set the limit by saying, “The water spray has to stay in our yard; no spraying into the neighbor’s yard.”
- Your child complies, but then, after a while, you notice the spray getting into the neighbor’s yard again. You set a consequence by saying, “Remember I told you no spraying in the neighbor’s yard. If the spray goes in the neighbor’s yard again, you will have to stop using the hose for today.”
- You watch your child for compliance, and if you do notice spray continues to go into the neighbor’s yard, you say, “I can see spray going into the neighbor’s yard again, so you will have to turn off and put away the hose for today.” You ensure your child complies with your direction.

# Engagement Skill

Parenting can be very challenging, especially when time is short and there are many things that need to get done in a day. One way to solve this problem is to use the Engagement Skill to encourage your child to follow your directions—for example, to get ready to go somewhere or to do household chores. You can make chores or tasks fun by using the Engagement Skill and increasing your emotional intensity, being playful, and including elements of surprise. When you use this skill in everyday life, you are strengthening the parent-child relationship, avoiding power struggles, and helping your child learn to listen to and follow directions. Here are a couple of examples of using the Engagement Skill to get your child to follow your directions.

## Example #1: Getting out the door fun

- Start off by saying something like, “I have an idea for a fun game. It’s called the ‘Counting Race.’ Let’s see if you can run to the hall, get on your jacket and grab your backpack, and get back here before I get to the number five. Ready? Go!”
- Count slowly as your child follows your instructions. You can make it more exciting by counting in different ways. For example: “One . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . four and a half . . . four and three quarters . . . five! You made it!”
- Make this activity more challenging by adding to the number of directions. For example: “Let’s see if you can run to the hall, get on your jacket, grab your backpack, put on your shoes, and get to the car before I count to fourteen. Ready? Set! Go!”

## Example #2: Tidying-up games

Time your child picking up toys and tidying an area. There are many variations with this game:

- See if your child can improve their time over several days. See if your child can beat you at cleaning up.
- Assign points to certain categories of toys that are to be put away. For example, one point for toys with wheels, two points for stuffed toys, three points for filling a container of Lego, four points for putting

the crayons in a box, and so on. Keep track of your and your child's points accumulated.

- Video you and your child doing the clean-up of a certain area. Don't stop the videoing until everything is cleaned up. Then replay the video on fast forward for lots of laughs!
- Explain to your child that you will play "Red Light/Green Light" when picking up toys. When you say "Green Light," your child can move and put the toys away, and when you say "Red Light," your child has to stop and freeze in position. To make it fun, set a timer and don't stop it when you say "Red Light" and see if your child can get the job done before the timer runs out!



*Here's something for you to think about:*

*You can turn chores into a playful activity by using the Engagement Skill. Here are some examples of common chores that you could consider turning into a fun activity:*

- *Baking, cooking, meal preparation*
- *Picking up toys, tidying, sweeping, cleaning*
- *Sorting or folding laundry*
- *Gardening, watering plants, flower arranging*
- *Building or repairing simple items*

*Please keep safety first and foremost in your mind. Make sure whatever your child is going to do is safe, age-appropriate, and child-friendly. Remember also that supervision of the activity is required. Be prepared for tasks and chores to take longer than normal. Focus on the process, not the outcome. Remember to enjoy yourselves, and if including your child in chores starts to feel like work, then discontinue this type of activity and return to it at a later time.*



## Regulating Skill

You can use the Regulating Skill in everyday life to help your child develop skills for self-regulation. Whenever you notice your child is beginning to get over-aroused emotionally, you can use the Regulating Skill to help your child

regulate their nervous system. Remember to use this skill before your child gets out of control.

Here is an example of using the Regulating Skill outside of playtime:

- Your child is working on a task, possibly doing a project for school or building something complex. You notice your child is getting anxious and agitated. You decide to use the Regulating Skill and you choose a breathing exercise to help your child regulate their emotions.
- First of all, regulate your own nervous system, for example, by taking some deep breaths yourself.
- Then, say to your child, “I can see this is challenging for you. Let’s take a break and try our breathing exercise for a minute. I will count backwards from ten and we will breath in and out slowly as I count down. Feel all the muscles in your body relax with each breath.”
- As you count down slowly, role model taking a deep breath in slowly and then blowing out slowly.
- At the end, you can say, “Now, notice how much better you feel.”

I have outlined several exercises for teaching your child coping skills for escalating emotions in the Appendix, including breathing, tense and relax, mindfulness, and visualization exercises. There are, however, many other playful ways to teach your child to calm and relax. These coping skills need to be practiced regularly in many different situations so your child becomes familiar with them when the skills need to be used and when emotions start to escalate.



*Please see the next chapter, Using Play to Reduce Anxiety in Your Child, for more ideas for using the Regulating Skill to help with anxiety.*



## Chapter Summary

The benefits of using the nine skills that I have outlined for Child-Directed and Parent-Directed Playtime are extensive and outlined in Chapter 1. Each of these nine skills has a positive impact on your child’s healthy development.



This chapter looks at how you can incorporate these skills used in playtime into everyday, real-life situations so that you will extend the benefits of these skills.

# Chapter 14:

## Using Play to Reduce Anxiety in Your Child

Anxiety is a normal emotional state that we all experience at various times in our lives. It is closely related to fear, which is another normal and necessary emotion that everyone experiences. We need to be fearful of certain situations in order to protect ourselves from danger.

Anxiety is usually associated with anticipated fear of something happening in the future. Anxiety is normal and beneficial when we are faced with a difficult situation. For example, it is normal for us to feel anxious before a test or speaking in front of a group of people, and our anxiety helps us to prepare for the difficult task.

Children experience various states of fear and anxiety from the moment they are born. Sometimes it is easy to tell if a child is anxious by their crying and clinging behaviors, but sometimes, it is difficult to identify anxiety in children and it may be overlooked. Some children hide their anxiety because it is too difficult for them to express it to others. Some children turn their anxiety into angry tantrums or defiant behaviors.

## Sources of Anxiety in Childhood

Some children are born with an anxious temperament and seem to be anxious of many situations right from the start. It is believed that up to fifteen percent of infants are born with a more anxious temperament.

There are developmental sources of anxiety throughout childhood as well, and all children experience fears and worries as part of their normal development. Most young children experience fears of the dark, monsters, separation from their parents, animals, and strangers at some point. As children grow, these fears gradually change to fears about social acceptance, academic and sports achievements, health, mortality, and family.

Other sources of anxiety for children arise from normal life and family transitions. Children go through many changes and transitions as they and their families grow and mature. For example, the birth of a sibling, starting school, moving to a new home, the death of an elderly grandparent, becoming accepted by a peer group, and mastering tasks in and out of school can all be stressful and anxiety-provoking for children.

In addition, difficult or even traumatic events that are out of the ordinary can happen to a child with the likelihood that anxiety will increase for that child afterward. For example, parental conflict and separation, illness or injury of the child or the child's family members, the unexpected death of a close family member, extended separations from parents, family or community violence, and natural disasters are all difficult and sometimes traumatic experiences for children to go through.

## Using the Play Skills to Reduce Anxiety

With difficult or traumatic events, children should see a professional to help with their anxiety. However, parents can use the nine playtime skills outlined above to reduce normal developmental anxiety or anxiety from normal life transitions in their children. The Empathic Skills help parents to identify and acknowledge their children's feelings, perceptions, and experiences, providing children with an environment of acceptance, which goes a long way in reducing children's anxiety levels. The Autonomy Skills will allow children to make their own choices and decisions, increasing self-confidence. The Play Structuring Skills will encourage parents to structure positive, regulated

interactions with their children. The Limit-Setting Skill will allow parents to keep things safe so children get a sense of security.

As mentioned previously, there are certain activities that enhance the development and regulation of a child's nervous system with regards to a child's ability to self-regulate. Play activities that have sensory, rhythmic, or movement components are very helpful in nervous system regulation and anxiety management.

Please review the discussion of the Regulating Skill in Chapter 8 before engaging in the anxiety reducing play activities mentioned below. It is important to understand the general principles outlined for the Regulating Skill with regards to:

- Regulating your own nervous system
- Using calming parent behaviors
- Teaching calming strategies ahead of time
- Regulating your child before emotions escalate

## **Play Activities to Help Your Anxious Child**

Anxious children can benefit a great deal from support from their parents. The following play activities will provide you with some ideas for helping your anxious child:

- Colour Your Feelings game
- Sand and water play
- Structured Imaginary Play

### **Colour Your Feelings game**

There are many versions and adaptations of this game since the idea was originally developed by Kevin O'Connor as the Color-Your-Life technique (Schaefer & Cangelosi, 2016, pp. 115-117). The version of this game I am introducing is a Parent-Directed Playtime activity and helps your child learn to identify and express feelings by doing a fun colouring activity. Being able to identify and express feelings is a fundamental skill that leads to a child being able to manage and regulate feelings. For anxious children, this is

especially important in order to decrease the intensity of strong and overwhelming feelings.

- Have ready paper and a selection of different coloured crayons or markers. Help your child to match a colour to a feeling (for example yellow=happy, pink=excited, red=angry, orange=worried, purple=scared, blue=sad, etc.). Choose both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings that your child is experiencing.
- Ask your child to draw how they feel by saying something like, “Draw me a picture of how you feel right now.” The drawing does not necessarily need to be of something specific; your child may just want to scribble on the paper. The bigger and heavier the area coloured, the stronger the feeling.
- Describe what your child is doing by saying, for example, “Oh, it looks like you are drawing lots of angry red and a little bit of sad blue. Now you’re adding some worried orange, and now you’re drawing some happy yellow. There’s a purple scared house, and you drew an excited pink person.”
- Remember to regulate your own nervous system throughout this activity.
- When your child is done, you can say something like, “Tell me about this picture. When was another time you felt lots of angry red? Sad blue? Worried orange? Happy yellow?”
- Pose the following question: “What can you do to make your uncomfortable feelings shrink and your comfortable feelings get bigger?” Help your child come up with some ideas to reduce the uncomfortable feelings and increase the comfortable feelings.

Variation:

- Draw an outline of a body and ask your child to draw where they feel certain feelings in their body. Identify different bodily sensations associated with different feelings, such as having sweaty hands, a fast heart rate, a hot face, feeling dizzy, having butterflies in your tummy, a lump in your throat, feeling jumpy, having no energy, or having tingly hands and feet.

## Sand and water play

Sensorimotor play activities will help to soothe and comfort children. Sand and water are excellent sensory materials that will support the development of your child's nervous system and help them learn to manage their emotions.



*Please see the section on “Sensory or ‘messy’ play” in Chapter 7 for how to set up a sand and water play area.*



- Get your child's attention and provide clear instructions for the activity by saying, “Here's a tub filled with sand and a container of water that you can mix into the sand if you want. You can put any of these toys in the sand or water as well. The rule is that the sand and water have to stay in the tubs or on this big plastic sheet.”
- Now put yourself into a Nondirective Role for Child-Directed Playtime and engage with your child using the Empathic and Autonomy Skills. Watch your child and remember not to tell your child what to do; just “be with” them as they explore the sand.
- Describe what your child is doing and experiencing by saying things like, “You're putting the dog in the corner”; “Now you're burying the rock”; “Looks like you're going to fill up the bucket”; “You're feeling curious about how the sieve works in the sand”; “I can see you like the feel of that sand.”
- Remember to regulate your own nervous system throughout this activity. Take some deep breaths and enjoy what your child is doing. Use calming parent behaviors such as slowing your movements and using a slower and quieter voice.
- Notice the calming effect of the sand and water on both you and your child. You can even step temporarily into a Directive Role for Parent-Directed Playtime and use the Play Structuring Skills to make comments to your child such as, “Notice how soft the sand feels”; “Take a nice deep breath as you enjoy playing in the sand.” These kinds of comments will help your child with mindfulness.

- If your child starts to throw sand or water, or take sand or water away from the messy play area, use the Limit-Setting Skill to remind your child of the rule to keep things within the messy play area or else the activity gets put away for the day.

## Structured Imaginary Play

Sometimes, children become anxious about past situations, such as a robbery in the neighborhood or a recent minor car accident, or future situations, such as going to the doctor, going for a sleep-over, or starting school. With Structured Imaginary Play, which is a Parent-Directed Playtime activity, you can make up an imaginary story to support your child in various ways.



*Please see the section in Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion of using Structured Imaginary Play.*



Here's an example of how you could handle an upcoming visit to the doctor when your child is anxious:

- You would make up the story so the plot parallels what is actually going to happen at the doctor's office and would include a character that your child could identify with. For example: "Once upon a time there was a cute little puppy . . ."
- Details of the story should be similar to match your child's experience; however, some things would not be identical because you want to disguise the fact that the story is about your child specifically. You are representing your child's experience symbolically through the imaginary story. For example, "This puppy had to go to the vet for a check-up . . ."
- Identify the feelings you think your child would experience from this situation and assign these to the character that your child identifies with. Basically, you want to mirror your child's feelings and experiences in this situation. For example: "This puppy was feeling a little bit scared and worried about going to visit the vet. The puppy was also feeling confused and didn't know what to expect."

- Next, bring up the points you want to stress. What information do you want to provide in the story? For example, how will the doctor visit unfold? What brave behaviors or coping skills do you want the characters in the story to model? What positive themes do you want to get across? For example, how are others supporting the anxious character? Are there any unhelpful thoughts or behaviors you want to challenge? You want to structure the story so that the character your child identifies with will go on to master their fears and there is a positive ending or outcome to the story.



*These are only three examples of play activities that would help anxious children. There are many more fun games and play activities that you and your child can discover. Any play activities that help to identify and acknowledge feelings, soothe and regulate the nervous system, or teach relaxation skills or coping strategies are excellent for all children, but especially those that are more anxious.*



## Chapter Summary

Anxiety is common in children and there are a number of things that can increase anxiety levels in children. Parents can use the various playtime skills to help their children manage anxiety. This chapter looked at using the playtime skills with three different play activities to enhance the development and regulation of your child's nervous system with regards to their ability to self-regulate.



# Closing Note

To me, playing with children seems fairly straightforward; however, I have to remind myself that I have played for many, many hours with children. As I was putting this book together, I realized how much was actually involved in playing with a child! Don't be discouraged if you find Child-Directed Playtime and Parent-Directed Playtime challenging at first. You may also not notice direct benefits right away. But these ways of playing with your child are unique and will give your child a chance to feel safe in freely expressing their feelings, preferences, perceptions, and experiences to you. This is the foundation for your child to be able to communicate freely with you for life and a wonderful way to add fun to your relationship.

I realize that there is a lot of material in this book to digest and make sense of. I have had many years of experience playing with my children, child clients, and now my grandchildren, but when I came to put guidelines down on paper, I struggled. Parent-child play is not simple! There is almost an infinite number of ways that parents and children can play together. Every parent and child is unique and every playtime is unique. What works one time in playtime may not work a second time. Parents are required to be flexible and adaptable as they engage in play with their children, and though it may sometimes be hard work, the rewards are worth it.

I have very much enjoyed putting this book together and my hope is that it will be useful, even in some small way, to you. I have tried to break down a fairly complex topic—playing with your child—into some simple concepts, guidelines, and skills so that almost any parent and child would be able to take advantage of the many benefits of playing together.

I have created these guidelines to provide some kind of framework for parent-child play. You are basically learning to interact with your child using a new language, the language of parent-child play. The most difficult part is in the beginning when you first begin using the skills and everything feels awkward and overwhelming. With consistent use and over time, the skills will become more natural.

I understand that there are many new concepts to understand that I have presented in this book. If you are struggling with getting these concepts to work for you, I would recommend you contact a healthcare or other professional who works with children, such as a family doctor, pediatrician, family counsellor, play therapist, child psychologist, child psychiatrist, social worker, occupational therapist, teacher, school counsellor, or child development specialist. Every professional who works with young children will understand the enormous benefits of parent-child play and will be able to support you in using the skills I have outlined here.

Monitor your feelings as you use the skills. Understand that you are learning a whole new way of interacting with your child and this will take time. You will not feel comfortable using all the skills right away, so don't feel discouraged. The best thing you can do is to remember that what you are learning with these skills is an amazing way of interacting and connecting with your child.

I wish you all the best on your path to strengthening your relationship with your child through play. Happy Playing!

# Appendix:

## Parent-Directed Playtime Fun Activities

### **Balancing pillows (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Have your child sit in a chair. Place one pillow on your child's head and help your child to balance it.
- Add additional pillows one at a time as long as your child is successful.
- Instead of pillows, you can use books, hats, stuffies, etc.
- Instead of sitting, your child can be standing or walking.
- Have your child lie down and put their feet up in the air and do the balancing on their feet.

### **Balloon massage (adapted from Sher, 2004)**

- Ask your child to lie on a mat or their bed
- Tell your child you are going to give them a massage with a balloon.
- Roll a balloon over your child's body. Use just the right amount of pressure on the balloon so that your child enjoys it.
- Encourage your child to relax and breathe deeply.
- Change places and have your child roll the balloon on you.

### **Balloon volleyball (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Count how many times you and your child can hit a balloon and keep it in the air without it touching the ground. When the balloon touches the ground, start from number one again. See how high of a count you can get.
- You can also increase the challenge by using different parts of your body, such as one finger, your elbow, or your head, to hit the balloon.
- You can also stay seated on the floor to make it harder.

### **Ball targets (adapted from Sher, 2004)**

- Use various items as targets, such as wastebaskets, pails, boxes, or food containers.
- Put something on the floor to mark where to stand.
- Using different types of balls, see how many you and your child can get into the targets, which can be set at varying distances from the thrower (Foam balls or bean bags are great for indoor play).
- You can also roll balls at targets to knock over, as in a bowling game, for example. Use things other than bowling pins to knock over.

### **Bean bag tilt (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Have your child stand or sit facing you.
- Tell your child that you will put a bean bag (or soft toy) on your own head, and when you give a special signal (like blinking your eyes, scrunching your nose, raising your eyebrows, or opening your mouth), you will drop the bean bag or toy into your child's outstretched hands by tilting your head forwards.
- Place the bean bag on your own head.
- Tell your child to hold their hands out in front and to watch you.
- To play, give your child the signal and then tilt your head forwards so the bean bag falls off your head and into your child's outstretched hands.

- Take turns and let your child be the one with the bean bag on their head.

### **Blowing bubbles (adapted from Garland & Clark, 1995)**

- Help your child get into a comfortable position. Tell your child you are going to play an imagination game.
- Ask your child to close their eyes and to take a deep, very slow breath and then blow it out slowly while imagining blowing a big bubble from a bubble wand that grows and then rises gently into the air.
- Get your child to blow more bubbles slowly and gently and to imagine the colour and movement of these bubbles.
- Tell your child to notice the tension and stress draining out of their body and how soft and relaxed they are feeling.
- You can do this in real life too by using bubble blowing soap and a wand and helping your child blow the bubbles slowly and gently.

### **Breathing game (adapted from Sher, 2002)**

- Sit facing your child and practice breathing exactly together. Don't use words, just look at each other and slowly get in sync. Inhale in at the same time. Hold the breath in for the same amount of time. Exhale and breathe out at the same time.
- Make up a specific breathing pattern to do together—for example, two deep breaths followed by two short breaths. Repeat or change the pattern.

### **Cotton ball touch (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Get your child to close their eyes and then touch your child gently with a cotton ball.
- Get your child to open their eyes and show where they were touched.

### **Cotton ball hockey (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- You and your child sit at opposite ends of a table.

- Blow cotton balls back and forth (using a straw or just your mouth), trying to get the cotton ball off the end of the table the other person is defending.

### **Cotton ball race (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- You and your child get on your hands and knees at one end of the room. Take turns blowing a cotton ball (using a straw or just your mouth) to the other side of the room. You can try to better your time on repeated trials, or see how many blows you need to get the ball across the room.
- A competitive version would be for each player to have their own cotton ball and see who can get it across the room first.

### **Do the opposite (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Stand facing your child. Explain the game to your child by saying something like, “When I give a command to you, then you do the opposite.” See what happens when you give the following commands:
  - Go
  - Stop
  - Walk forward
  - Walk backward
  - Stand up
  - Sit down
  - Go to your right
  - Go to your left
  - Look down
  - Look up
  - Hands in front
  - Hands behind
  - Hands on head

- Hands on feet
- To make it easier, you can start off by having your child do what you command, and then switch to doing the opposite.
- Think up more actions that can be done the opposite way.
- Mix up the above commands so they are not in such a logical sequence.

### **Do what I say and not what I do (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Explain to your child that you will do two things: 1) demonstrate an action and 2) tell them to do something that is different than your action.
- Then, tell your child to do what you say and not what you do and see if your child can correctly follow the verbal directions instead of imitating what you are doing. For example, say, “Touch your head” while at the same time touching your elbow. Your child should be touching their head.

### **Follow-the-leader (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Tell your child you will move forward in a certain style, such as skipping, walking slowly, moving sideways, walking backwards, or walking with your hands up or down, and then your child is to follow you in the same manner.
- Take turns being the leader.

### **Free throw (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Use cotton balls or foam (Nerf) balls.
- Divide your play area in half, you on one side and your child on the other.
- Each player starts with an equal pile of balls.
- When you say “go,” the game is for each player to get rid of all of the balls on their side by throwing them to the other side.

### **Freeze (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Explain to your child that they can move around the room however they want (walking, running, dancing, skipping, jumping, etc.) until you say “Freeze.” Then, your child has to stop instantly and hold that frozen position. When you say “Thaw,” your child can continue to move around.
- Instead of saying “freeze” and “thaw,” you can use different sounds for each word, such as clapping, whistling, or drumming.
- This is the same game as “Red Light/Green Light,” only you say “Red Light” to stop the action and “Green Light” to start the action in that game.

### **Guess a letter (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Tell your child you will trace a letter or number with your finger on their bare skin (e.g., arm, leg, back) and then they have to guess which letter or number you have traced.
- Take turns doing the tracing and guessing.

### **Hand clapping games (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Say to your child something like, “I am going to clap a rhythm and then you copy me and clap the same way.”
- Start with a very simple rhythm and gradually clap faster, slower, and more complex rhythms.
- You can also clap out a rhythm or a song together.
- Use different ways of clapping:
  - Clap each other’s hands
  - Clap on your knees, shoulders, or head
  - Clap on each other’s knees, shoulders, or head
  - Tap your hands or feet on the floor
  - Tap on a drum



- Take turns being the leader and follower.

### **Hand outlines (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Get your child to put their hands flat on a piece of paper and to hold still while you trace around their hands to outline them. Then have your child do the same with your hands.
- You can do many things with the outlined hands. For example, you can draw faces at the end of each finger and name them. Decide what each finger likes to do best and draw that if you want to.
- Try doing this with each other's feet.
- Make a picture of your child's body by asking your child to lie down on a large piece of paper and then tracing around their body. Then you can both colour in the outline.

### **Hide-and-seek**

- Go over the rules first with your child by saying something like, "To play hide-and-seek, first I will hide my eyes and count to ten while you go and find a hiding spot. When I get to ten, I will say 'Ready or not, here I come' and I will open my eyes and come to find where you have hidden."
- When your child has hidden, pretend to look for your child and make appropriate searching comments: "Hmm, they're not over here; oh, and they're not under this blanket; I wonder where they are? Hmm, I just saw them here a few minutes ago!"
- Don't let your child get frustrated by having to wait too long to be found, but also don't find your child immediately.
- When you find your child, act surprised in a big and happy way.

### **Hide-and-seek with toys**

- Play hide-and-seek on a smaller scale. Children love to play this game in the sand!
- Choose several items to hide and show them to your child.

- Tell your child to close their eyes while you hide the items.
- When you are done hiding, have your child open their eyes and search for the items.
- Don't make the game too challenging or too easy.
- Take turns hiding and searching for items.

### **Hotter/colder**

- Get your child to leave the room or cover their eyes while you hide a small object somewhere in the room.
- Ask your child to return, or open their eyes, and get them to find the hidden object.
- When your child is getting near the object, tell them they are getting hotter. When your child is getting further away from the object, tell them they are getting colder. Indicate your child's closeness to the object using words like:
  - "Warm, warmer, much warmer, hot, getting hotter, very hot, burning hot, ouch!"
  - "Cool, cooler, getting chilly, cold, getting colder, freezing, starting to snow, ice block!"

### **I can make you laugh (adapted from Sher, 2002)**

- Tell your child to keep a straight face and try not to laugh and then say, "I bet I can make you laugh."
- Then start doing silly things to see if you can make your child laugh. Silly faces and goofy actions are great; however, the rule is no touching your child!
- Reverse roles and get your child to try to make you laugh. Pretend to struggle, trying hard not to laugh, then break out into laughter.

## Imaginary play scenarios

- **House, school, town, farm, fort, store, picnic, or birthday party:** Please see Parent-Directed Imaginary Play under the Engagement Skill in Chapter 8 for ideas on setting up these imaginary play scenarios.
- **Doctor's office, dental office, hospital, or veterinary clinic:** Provide a play medical kit and real Band-Aids, masking tape (for casts), popsicle sticks (for splints), cotton puffs, and Kleenex. Towels and facecloths can be beds, and laundry baskets can be animal cages. You, your child, or the toys can take on various roles, such as patient, family member, nurse, or doctor. Find something to use (like boxes) to represent, for example, a clinic, hospital, ambulance, or X-ray machine. Send patients home with a prescription or a note to come back for a check-up.
- **Medieval times:** Dress up, for example, as kings, queens, princes, princesses, knights, wizards, witches, fairies, elves, or dragons. Fun props include foam swords, shields, magic wands, crowns, hats, capes, masks, and jewelry. Set up different spots for castles, caves, hiding places, or dens.
- **Outer space:** Dress up as astronauts and aliens or use small astronaut and alien figures. Find something to be a space ship. Set up different space stations on friendly and hostile planets. Set up various missions to, for example, explore new worlds or protect a vulnerable colony from dangerous aliens.
- **Restaurant:** Set up for a dinner party. Make up a menu. Use a small memo pad to take orders and to write bills for customers. Find something to use as a cash register and make or buy play money. Roles could be, for example, restaurant owner or chef, cashier, cranky customer, happy customer, clumsy waiter, or messy customer.
- **Theatre performance, music group, or orchestra:** Set up a small theatre or stage using fabric pieces for curtains. Set up a play, or create an orchestra with musical instruments. Puppets, stuffed animals, parents, or children can be actors or players. Have an audience of people, animals, or dolls. Pretend to sell tickets to the concert or play.

### **Mindfulness circle (adapted from Sher, 2002)**

- Do this game individually or stand back-to-back with your child and link elbows.
- Slowly turn in a circle 360 degrees. As you and your child turn, take turns saying what you are noticing. For example: “I see my sweater on the chair,” “I see the lamp in the corner,” “I see the computer light blinking.”
- Count how many things you can see.

### **Mindfulness walk outdoors (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Take a walk together outdoors. Tell your child that for the next few minutes you want both of you to be very aware of how things feel and what you are noticing. While you are walking, say the following:
  - “Notice your feet walking on the ground. Notice what it feels like to walk on different surfaces.”
  - “Feel the air on your skin. Is it cool or warm? Nice or not nice? Do you notice anything else on your skin, like raindrops or wind?”
  - “What do you smell? Can you tell where the smells come from? Are they pleasant or unpleasant smells?”
  - “Now just listen to any sounds. How many different sounds do you hear? What are they? Are they loud or quiet? Nice or not nice?”
  - “What do you see? Look carefully! Describe them in detail. Look for things that you have not noticed before.”
  - “Can you combine senses, like feeling the air on your skin and listening to a specific sound at the same time?”
  - “Now feel your body. Are your head and neck relaxed? How are your arms moving? Notice how you are breathing; is it fast or slow, shallow or deep?”

### **Mindfulness at home (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Do the same activity as the mindfulness walk outdoors while sitting at home. Have your child sit with their eyes closed and ask these questions:
  - “What sounds do you hear?”
  - “What smells do you smell?”
  - “How are you breathing? Fast, slow, shallow, deep?”
  - “How do your clothes feel on your body? Comfortable? Itchy? Warm? Soft?”
  - “Do you have any taste in your mouth from something you recently ate?”
  - “How does the air feel around you? Warm? Cool? Dry?”
  - “Notice how are you feeling? Relaxed? Tense? Sleepy? Excited? Bored? Restless? Worried? Or what other feeling?”

### **Mirroring games (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Tell your child that they are a mirror and that they have to copy what you do.
- Then face your child and move your arms, face, or other body parts and encourage your child to move in the same way as if they are a mirror reflecting you. Use very simple movements to start with.
- Try moving at different speeds and moving in more complex patterns.
- Take turns being the leader and follower.

### **Mother/Father, May I? (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- This game is similar to Simon Says. Have your child stand some distance away from you.
- Give instructions to your child to do something by saying, for example, “Take three giant steps towards me,” or “Take one baby step backwards,” or “Hop two times forward.”

- Explain to your child that they must say “Mother/Father, may I?” before responding to the command.
- If your child forgets, they must return to the starting line.
- The goal is to have your child get to you. When they get to you, be happy and excited to see them.
- This game can be adapted from “Mother/Father, May I?” to use whatever term the parent or caregiver uses.

### **Move like an animal (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

Tell your child to move like a certain animal. Demonstrate or give ideas or specific directions if your child seems stuck. Here are examples of animals (be creative and think of others):

- Duck
- Walrus
- Cat
- Crab
- Frog
- Orca
- Dog
- Kangaroo
- Butterfly
- Rabbit
- Eagle
- Worm
- Elephant
- Snake
- Bear
- Horse

### **Movement games (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Explain to your child that first you will do a movement or action, and then it will be your child's turn to copy that action and to add on a new action.
- Continue taking turns and adding actions until it gets too hard to remember, or stop at a certain number of actions and then repeat it as a dance.
- Try doing this to music!

### **Moving together (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Stand face to face with your child and squeeze a pillow or balloon between your bellies without letting it fall to the floor and without touching it.
- Tell your child that you will be giving directions on where you will be going with the balloon/pillow between you (for example, to the left, right, backwards, forwards).
- Start moving together and see how far you can go keeping the balloon/pillow between you without it falling on the floor and without touching it.
- Try it with parent and child back-to-back.
- Try putting the balloon or pillow in different places, such as between your heads or your hips.

### **My Special Place (adapted from Garland & Clark, 1995)**

- Get your child settled in a comfortable place. Tell your child you are going to play an imagination game.
- Ask your child to close their eyes and to imagine a place where they feel safe, relaxed, and happy.
- Let your child know that this place can be anything by saying something like, "For some kids it might be a warm beach on a sunny day. For other kids it might be a green field in a valley surrounded by mountains. Some kids like to imagine being in a quiet forest. Others

like to imagine being in their own beds with thick, soft, warm blankets. For you, it will be whatever you want it to be.”

- You don't need to ask your child what this place is; however, if they want to tell you, that's okay.
- Say the following:
  - “Imagine what it would look like. What things do you notice? Look up. Look down. Look back and forth. What colours do you see? Take a moment or two to look at your Special Place.”
  - “What sounds do you hear? How many different sounds are there? Take a few moments to listen to these sounds.”
  - “What are some of the pleasant smells around you? Are they strong or faint? Take a few moments to notice these pleasant smells.”
  - “What do you feel with your hands? What do you feel on your skin? Is it warm or cool? Take a moment to notice how things feel.”
  - “What are you doing? Are you sitting, lying, standing, or doing something active? Notice what this feels like.”
  - “Now take a deep, slow breath in through your nose, and then breath out slowly through your mouth, feeling all the pleasant, calm, and relaxed feelings.”
  - “You can stay in this special place for a while, if you like. When you are ready, take another deep breath in through your nose to fill yourself with new energy, and out through your mouth to feel relaxed. Then stretch your arms and legs, and open your eyes.”
- Practice doing this with your child regularly when they are feeling calm and relaxed. Then, when your child is feeling worried or upset about something, do this exercise with them so that they can get back to feeling calm and relaxed again.



## **Obstacle course**

- Set up some items either indoors or outdoors that your child would be able to safely get on top of, crawl under, squeeze through, jump over, or balance on, for example. Tape large numbers on each of the obstacles in the order they are meant to be taken.
- Tell your child you have created an obstacle course for them. Tell them they are to do the obstacles in the order that the numbers show.
- Tell your child “go” and watch and cheer on enthusiastically. Provide help to your child if needed to master the obstacle.
- You can do this at a playground as well for more fun.

## **Paper bag game (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Explain to your child that you will be collecting a small item (such as a small toy, button, pen, paper clip, etc.), keeping this object secret by putting it in a paper bag. You will get your child to put their hand in the paper bag and not look inside. Then, your child is to guess what the object is just by feeling it.
- Ask your child to go out of the room or hide their eyes while you are putting the object into the paper bag.
- When you have collected the item in the bag, fold over the top, and tell your child to return or you go over to where your child is. Tell your child to close their eyes, or keep them closed, and ask your child to put their hand into the bag and, just by feeling it and not looking at it, to guess what the item is.
- Take turns being the hider and the guesser!
- Make it more difficult by putting more than one item into the bag.
- Make it easier by allowing your child to put both hands into the bag to guess what the item is, or by blindfolding your child and allowing your child to bring the item out of the bag to guess what it is.

### **Popping bubbles (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Blow a bubble and have your child pop the bubble with a particular body part, such as their finger, toe, elbow, shoulder, or ear.
- Blow many bubbles and have your child pop all the bubbles as quickly as they can.

### **Red Light, Green Light (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- This game is the same as “Freeze,” just using slightly different word.

### **Secret signals (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Hold hands and stand facing each other.
- Explain to your child that you will be using non-verbal signals to indicate the direction you will be moving in. For example, when you blink your left eye two times, both you and your child will take two steps to your left (child’s right), when you lean your head back you will take one step back (child goes forward), and when you move your head forward you take one step forward (child goes backward).
- Take turns with who gives the signals.

### **Simon Says (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Explain to your child that you will be giving them a command and that if you say “Simon says” before the command, they are to do what you say, but if you just give the command without saying “Simon says” then they are not to follow your command. Game stops when the player chooses an incorrect option.
- This game is similar to Mother/Father, May I?

### **Special handshake (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Make up a special handshake together by, for example high fiving, clasping hands, wiggling fingers, etc. Gradually add new parts to it to make it more complex.

### **Sticker game (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- Tell your child you are going to take turns putting stickers on each other.
- Have stickers available and sit close to each other.
- You and your child take turns putting stickers on each other.
- Another way to play is to match the location of where the stickers are put.
- Take turns being the first one to apply the sticker.
- After all the stickers have been applied, you and your child can remove them and place them on paper or decorate a box with them.

### **Tag (or Chase)**

- Tell your child you are going to chase and try to catch them and their job is to get away from you.
- Say, “Ready, set, go!” to start the game
- Be enthusiastic and energetic when chasing, but don’t catch your child right away. The fun is in the chase.
- When you catch your child, show your happiness at catching them.

### **Tasting and sniffing games (adapted from Sher, 1998)**

- Gather together, without your child seeing, several safe items that your child could taste.
- Explain to your child that you will ask them to close their eyes and open their mouth and that you will give them a small bit of food or liquid and their job is to see if they can identify what the item is.
- Do the same thing as above with safe items that can be sniffed. Describe the game to your child and then present the items to your child and see if they can identify what the item is by smell.

### **Tense and relax games**

Lemon squeeze (adapted from Kendall et al., 1992)

- Tell your child to pretend they have a lemon in their hand. Ask them to squeeze it hard for five seconds. As you count, encourage your child to squeeze all the juice out and to feel the tightness in their hand and arm as they squeeze. Then, after counting to five, say “Okay, relax” and ask them to pretend to drop the lemon to the ground. Tell them to give their hand a gentle shake and then to notice how soft and floppy their hand feels and to enjoy how this feels. Repeat.

Cat stretch (adapted from Kendall et al., 1992)

- Get your child to pretend they are a furry, lazy cat that wants to stretch. Get them to stretch their arms out in front and then raise their arms over their head for five seconds while you count. Tell your child to stretch higher and to try to touch the ceiling. Get them to notice the pull in their shoulders. After five seconds, say, “Relax” and get your child to drop their arms quickly back to their sides and notice how their shoulders feel more relaxed. Tell your child to notice how good and relaxed their shoulders feel. Repeat.

Turtle trick (adapted from Kendall et al., 1992)

- Get your child to pretend they are a turtle sitting on a rock by a nice peaceful pond. Now say, “Oh no, here comes danger.” Get your child to pretend to pull their head into their shell by pulling their shoulders up to their ears and pushing their head down into their shoulders. Have them hold that position tight for five seconds while you count and say, “Don’t let even a tiny piece of your head show outside your shell, turtle.” Get your child to notice how tight their neck and shoulders feel. After five seconds say, “Okay, relax, the danger is gone, turtle, you can come out and just relax and feel that nice warm sunshine.” Tell your child to notice how much better it feels to be relaxed than to be all tight. Repeat.

Fly-on-your-nose (adapted from Kendall et al., 1992)

- Get your child to pretend an annoying fly has landed on their nose. Ask them to try to get it off without using their hands. Encourage your child to wrinkle their nose, scrunch up their eyes, and move their mouth, cheeks, and forehead. Get them to do this while you count for five seconds, then say, “Relax now! He flew away.” Get your child to

notice their whole face relaxing and notice how good their face feels. What a relief! Repeat.

Elephant stomp (adapted from Kendall et al., 1992)

- Get your child to pretend they are lying in the grass. Then say, “Oh no, here comes a baby elephant, but he’s not watching where he’s going! He doesn’t see you lying there in the grass and he is about to step on your stomach! Don’t move, you don’t have time to get out of the way. Make your stomach really hard. Tighten up your stomach muscles really tight!” Get your child to hold that position tight for five seconds while you count. Get them to harden their stomach so it won’t get hurt if the elephant steps on them. After counting to five, say, “Okay relax, it looks like the elephant is going the other way.” Get your child to let their stomach relax, go as soft as it can, and notice how good it feels to relax. Repeat.

Feet-in-the-sand (adapted from Barrett et al., 2000)

- Get your child to imagine they are at the beach and walking in the sand and a big wave is coming. Get them to scrunch their toes up so they dig into the sand. Tell them to make their legs stiff and tight so they don’t get knocked over by the wave. Get your child to notice how tight their feet and legs are feeling. Get them to hold that position tight as you count for five seconds. Then tell them that the wave has gone and to let their legs and feet and toes get very floppy and relaxed. Tell them to give each leg and foot a gentle shake and feel how loose and floppy their legs, feet, and toes feel now. Get them to notice how good their legs and feet feel when they are loose and floppy. Repeat.

### **Three-legged walk (adapted from Booth & Jernberg, 2010)**

- First, explain to your child what will be happening in this game.
- Stand beside your child and tie your two adjacent legs (one yours and one your child’s) together with a scarf or ribbon.
- With arms around each other’s waists, walk across the room. You will be responsible for coordinating the movement; for example, you could say, “Inside, outside” to indicate which foot to start moving first and count “one, two, one, two” as a beat for your steps.

- To make it more challenging, add obstacles such as pillows or chairs to go around.

### **Treasure hunt**

- Gather up items that you will hide around the house or outdoors. Keep track and make a list of what items you collect. Hide the items without your child seeing you.
- Tell your child you have created a treasure hunt. Tell your child what items they will be searching for. Define the area that the items are hidden in so your child does not search where items are not hidden. Provide your child with a bag or basket to collect the items.
- Tell your child “Go” and watch and praise them as they collect the items. Let them know how many items are left to be found.
- Celebrate when your child finds all the items.
- To make it more challenging, you can set a timer to see if your child can get all the items within a set time or time how long it takes them to get all the items, then do it again and see if they can beat the time.

### **What’s missing?**

- Gather up about ten to fifteen small toys or household articles such as a spoon, a pen, or a spool of thread, and put them on a tray.
- Have your child look at the tray and study what is on the tray for about two minutes.
- Then the tray is taken out of the room and one item is removed.
- The tray is returned to your child and they try to guess which article is missing.
- You can keep going by continuing to remove items.

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Kathy Eugster (MA, Counselling Psychology) has worked in counselling and therapy for over twenty years, including as a Registered Clinical Counsellor with the British Columbia Association of Clinical Counsellors; Certified Play Therapist-Supervisor with the Canadian Association for Play Therapy; and child and family therapist with family service agencies and in private practice. In 2013, she won the Monica Herbert Award from the Canadian Association for Play Therapy for outstanding contribution and dedication to child psychotherapy and play therapy in Canada. She is now retired from clinical practice but continues to support parents and caregivers with books and articles on parent-child play.



Kathy lives in Vancouver, B.C. with her partner Neil and their dog Jasmine. She enjoys spending time in nature and with animals, and loves to spend time with her family, which includes three grown children and four young grandchildren. Kathy's many happy hours spent playing with her children and grandchildren helped inspire this book.

You can find more from Kathy on her website, Pacific Spirit Play Resources (<https://www.pacificspiritplay.com>), where she offers an e-newsletter, blog posts on parent-child play activities supporting healthy child development and caregiver-child relationships, and more.



# Most parents and caregivers know playing with their child is beneficial.

What can feel much less clear, however, is just how to go about engaging in playtime. Here to dispel any feelings of uncertainty and anxiety around this subject is *Play Skills for Parents*. This informative yet easy-to-read guide to parent-child play is based on research in developmental psychology and parent-child relationships, as well as author Kathy Eugster's over twenty years of experience in counselling and play therapy (not to mention her experience as a parent and grandparent herself!).

*Play Skills for Parents* goes beyond merely listing potential play activities. Instead, Eugster highlights nine essential skills for facilitating parent-child play, thoroughly explains why, when, and how to use each skill, and provides an abundance of examples showing each skill in action. In addition, Eugster guides parents and caregivers through:

- How play can foster healthy child development and strengthen the parent-child relationship
- How to engage in child-led and parent-led play
- Why child-led play can especially enhance a child's development
- Numerous examples of types of play activities, including calming activities for emotional regulation
- How to set up play areas for different types of playtime
- How the playtime skills can be applied in other life activities
- And more!

Perfect for any parent or caregiver of children ages three to ten, *Play Skills for Parents* won't just bolster your confidence and communication skills during playtime—it will give you a new appreciation for this special time spent with your child.



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